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Everyone loves an underdog, and for this issue we've told two of the year's most unlikely success stories: village club Mjallby becoming champions of Sweden and Cape Verde qualifying for their first-ever World Cup. You'd have got long odds on Morocco triumphing at the recent Under-20 World Cup too, and we take a closer look at their shock win as well. There are no underdogs at the upcoming Copa Libertadores final though, with the two best sides in South America set to meet, while Liverpool's Dominik Szoboszlai told us about his dream of reaching the 2026 Champions League final back home in Budapest.

Jamie Evans, Managing Editor

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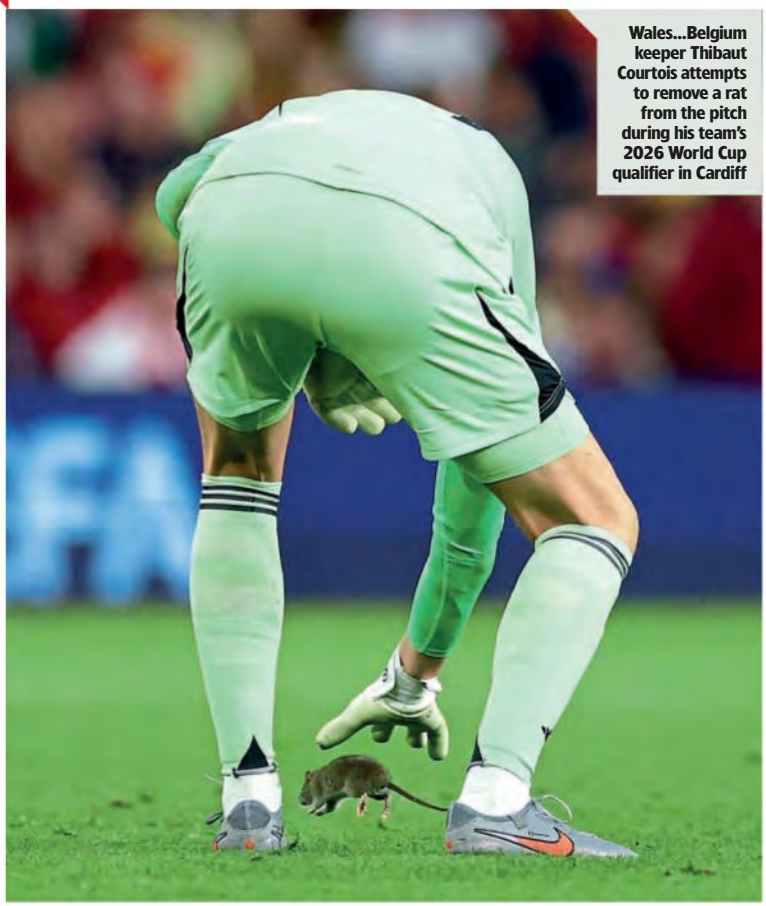

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Henry WINTER
THE VOICE OF FOOTBALL

Tony Bloom: football's best investor

When Chris Hughton was dismissed as Brighton & Hove Albion head coach within 24 hours of keeping them up in the Premier League in 2019, I tweeted angrily about what a heartless decision it was by the club's owner, Tony Bloom. Couldn't Bloom have let Hughton savour the moment?

A change was inevitable, but I felt Hughton deserved a week to celebrate with staff rather than being rushed out the building with the Champagne corks still popping.

Bloom phoned. He delivered one of the most cogent explanations for the expediency of speedily sacking a much-loved employee. Bloom's argument was it would have been even more "heartless" – to use my accusing word – to allow Hughton back into the training ground, get a taste of the next season, only to then tell him to clear his desk at the end of the week. Swift termination was more humane, Bloom said.

The call gave me an insight into why Brighton have blossomed under Bloom. He's decisive, and plenty of thought and analytics go into his decision-making. He took over Brighton in 2009, built the Amex, embedded them in mid-table Premier League and they've even had a brief run in Europe. They make money and they make friends through their football and the atmosphere of their "Sussex by the sea" home.

The historic Edinburgh club, Heart of Midlothian, are now fortunate to have his advice to call upon after he bought a 29% stake for £9.86 million in June. Bloom brings more than investment to Tynecastle – he brings belief. At the start of the season, Bloom delighted and surprised fans by saying Hearts could challenge the Old Firm, and could win the Scottish Premiership at least once in the next decade.

Some fans felt Bloom's rhetoric was over-ambitious, especially at a club that has not won the title since 1960. But his optimism has spread through the club, helped by a good head coach in Derek McInnes. Hearts supporters now sing Bloom's name, an honour not often afforded to suits.

Bloom's involvement is significant not only for the Gorgie Boys but for Scottish football generally. It's a vote of confidence in the future of the league. It will focus minds at Celtic and Rangers, both of whom have recently changed managers (Martin O'Neill returning to Celtic Park and Danny Rohl taking charge at Ibrox). A change in the title narrative would certainly excite broadcasters. All eyes will be on Celtic Park when high-flying Hearts visit on December 7.

Hearts investor ...Tony Bloom celebrates his new club's victory over Celtic in October

> Bloom brings more than investment to Tynecastle – he brings belief

Bloom's influence has already been felt at other clubs he's invested in, like reigning Belgian champions Union Saint-Gilloise. Bloom is that ideal combination of someone who loves football, understands it, and applies cold, hard logic to decisions, especially in recruitment of players and coaches.

Brighton fans believe in Bloom so much, and especially in his use of analytics in recruitment and gambling, that they regularly punt on horses he owns: Dash of Azure at Ascot, Sky Majesty at Longchamp, Bunting at Newmarket and Crown of Oaks at Ayr. And always Brighton at the Amex.

Bloom's talent as a poker player – he's nicknamed The Lizard – means he's a smart negotiator. Bloom could have built the Amex three times over with the £280m that Brighton have

received from Chelsea alone in transfer fees for players like Moises Caicedo (£115m) and compensation for management like Graham Potter and staff (£21m) since 2022.

He appoints well. When Hughton was dismissed in May 2019, Potter arrived within a week. How would they replace Potter when he left for Chelsea three years later? Roberto De Zerbi came in, promptly beat Potter's Chelsea 4-1 and guided Brighton into Europe. Eventually, differences arose, and De Zerbi's contract was terminated in 2024. It was fun for a while.

Fabian Hurzeler came in from St Pauli, at 31 the youngest head coach in Premier League history. Nobody knew much about him. Bloom did. He saw Hurzeler would be a good fit, and that alignment ensured that Hurzeler's system suited the squad he inherited. There was no trauma, no need for large transfer turnover. The succession planning went smoothly. Hurzeler steered Brighton to eighth in his first season.

Bloom recognises talent and pays for it. He was at his persuasive best when hiring chief executive Paul Barber in 2012, probably his finest appointment. As they realised how much they wanted to work together, how aligned they were, discussions quickly became negotiations. Bloom lent across the table, and pulled a page from Barber's notebook.

Hearts boss...Derek McInnes has the club flying high

On it, Bloom wrote an offer, salary, bonus, pension, etc, and pushed the paper back across to Barber. The paper moved back and forth a couple more times before Barber agreed, and signed the scrap. Bloom followed suit. "There you go," Bloom said to Barber, "put it in your pocket, we're done." And that was that. Good judgement, quick decision-making.

Even if I felt sacking Hughton so quickly was heartless, Bloom's judgement was vindicated. As Hearts are discovering right now to their great satisfaction.

Football and ChatGPT

On hearing that the one-time Manchester United player Demetri Mitchell (and it really was one time, against Crystal Palace in 2017) used ChatGPT to negotiate his move from Exeter City to Leyton Orient, I quickly went online and asked ChatGPT to "write me an article about the use of ChatGPT in negotiating football contracts for a player". Even more quickly, it responded.

It began, rather grandly I thought for a newcomer to football writing, with the title: "The Use of ChatGPT in Negotiating Football Contracts: A New Era in Sports Management". Its intro, lacking a snappy "read-on" line but informative, then explained: "The world of professional football has long been characterized by high-stakes negotiations between players, agents, and clubs. Traditionally, these discussions have relied heavily on human intuition, experience, and legal expertise. However, the emergence of advanced artificial intelligence (AI) tools like ChatGPT is beginning to reshape this landscape."

My new associate – I called it Aladdio – promised to "analyse existing contract templates, identify potential risks or ambiguous clauses, and suggest revisions to ensure better protection for the player's interests". Interesting. AI quickly got into details. "For example, an agent might input a draft contract into ChatGPT and ask it to highlight any clauses that could limit transfer flexibility or reduce performance bonuses".

ChatGPT is certainly useful. It showed ways that players could be better prepared when meeting club execs. It highlighted the importance of data, communication skills, establishing "fair market value", and, kindly, pointed out the risks of AI given the sensitivity of confidential details in negotiations.

I admired its honesty. I found myself nodding in approval at its conclusion that "AI should complement, not replace, the role of human professionals. Legal experts, agents, and financial advisors still play a critical role in interpreting complex clauses and understanding the human dynamics of negotiation – something even the most advanced AI cannot fully replicate".

So, could Mitchell's AI revelation become a revolution in player contract negotiations, certainly further down the pyramid? In that one game, Mitchell played alongside Paul Pogba, Wayne Rooney, Scott McTominay and Michael Carrick. They will have made fortunes from the game. Mitchell hasn't, so saving on an agent's fee is tempting.

He expanded on the *From My Left* podcast exactly what he asked ChatGPT: "This is what I was on last season, moving to London, cost of living, missus is gonna move down with me, my little one. I did think I was worth a little bit more as well, but you don't want to be like that: 'Oh, yeah I think I should be worth an X amount.' And then, also because I didn't use the agent, I get that [agent fee] as a signing-on fee." It's not huge sums at League One level, but every little helps the player and his family.

AI agent... Leyton Orient's Demetri Mitchell

ChatGPT is hardly a newcomer to football. It's used for press releases and statements. It's used for generic responses for players to post on social media. Doubtless some agents already use it for routine contract work. The more the game involves data, the more AI can be used. Clubs, especially with American owners, frequently use AI in recruitment. It's even creeping into management: Seattle Reign head coach Laura Harvey used ChatGPT to prepare tactics to combat specific opponents: "I put in: 'what formation should you play to beat NWSL teams?'" she admitted in a recent press conference. "It spurted out every team in the league and what formation you should play. And for two teams, it went 'you should play a back five.' So I did. No joke, that's why I did it."

So perhaps we shouldn't be surprised that enterprising players like Mitchell use it. The more AI learns about contracts, and the numbers involved, the more prevalent its use will become, certainly outside the elite. Agents won't be getting nervous just yet. But I'd better ask ChatGPT to check...

Keir RADNEDGE

THE INSIDER

A tale of two presidents

The story of the budding, but necessary, friendship between Donald Trump and Gianni Infantino

Cosying-up...Trump and Infantino at a world leaders' summit in Egypt

Ahead of the upcoming draw for the 2026 World Cup in December, FIFA supremo Gianni Infantino had been seen basking in the warm aura of United States President Donald Trump at just about each and every major occasion.

The two presidents are best friends to such an extent that Infantino was among the insiders when Trump took the oath of office in the US Capitol Rotunda, sat alongside past US presidents, Supreme Court judges, tech bosses Elon Musk, Jeff Bezos and Mark Zuckerberg, and populist foreign leaders such as Argentina's Javier Milei and Italy's Giorgia Meloni.

Infantino had received a "thank you" from Trump at the pre-inauguration rally and was back at the White House again in March when the US President signed an executive order creating a Club World Cup and World Cup preparations task force.

The hectic pursuit of his new best friend continued at a White House crypto summit, followed by the Riyadh visit to Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman and a subsequent investment summit, a return stateside for the Club World Cup final trophy presentation in July, then a World Cup trophy handover in the Oval Office in August. More recently, Infantino was with Trump at the ASEAN Summit for Peace in Egypt, before the pair were reunited at a business forum in November.

"I have a great relationship with President Trump, where I consider him a really close friend," declared Infantino in his speech in Miami, which Trump hadn't stuck around to listen to. "Of course he's being very helpful in everything we are doing for the World Cup."

That followed the news that a FIFA Peace Prize was to be presented at the finals draw. No prizes for guessing who the likely "secret" recipient will be. Meanwhile, Trump's daughter Ivanka has joined "leaders from sport, entertainment, business and philanthropy" on a FIFA education foundation.

Infantino has been cosying-up on such a grand scale that Canada's Prime Minister Mark Carney and Mexico's President Claudia Sheinbaum may wonder if their countries remain on the World Cup map. Several US city leaders may be wondering the same.

In October, Trump raised the possibility of shifting Boston's seven games elsewhere in his political war against the local Democrats. He told reporters: "We could take them

Oval Office meeting... Infantino presents Trump with a FIFA jersey

[World Cup matches] away. I love the people of Boston...but your mayor is not good." And in September, he took similar presidential swipes at Democrat-run cities Seattle and San Francisco: "If someone is doing a bad job and I think the conditions are not safe, I would call Gianni, who is great, and tell him to move the matches somewhere else. And he would do it. He wouldn't like it, but he would do it, very easily."

Trump's summation, no doubt, is correct.

But while Trump has no known loyalty to soccer, his outreach is nothing new. From Trump Tower, in December 1991, he sat alongside Jimmy Greaves and Ian St John to conduct the quarter-final draw for the English League Cup (then the Rumbelows Cup). Publicity, you see. As one of the draw hosts said: "The appeal for Donald was being on a TV show that had a large audience in Britain. He saw it as an opportunity to promote himself and his company."

At the time, Trump recalled having played the game in high school and thought that maybe it would "catch on in the US." Hence, 27 years later, hosting Infantino in the Oval Office in August 2018 – just two months after the US had won co-hosting rights for the 2026 finals – Trump conceded: "Soccer has come such a long way. I guess you call it football, but over here we call it soccer. Maybe someday they'll change the name? I'm not sure, we'll see. It's working very well either way." During the meeting, Infantino presented Trump with an official FIFA shirt with his name and the No.26 on the back.

Infantino needs to remain in Trump's good books until the World Cup trophy is handed over next July

Infantino's ingratiating of Trump has long prompted a firestorm of cynicism, sarcasm and disbelief from the media. But, for a few moments, let's turn the telescope around.

Some 11 years ago, I questioned Jerome Valcke, then FIFA's all-powerful No.2, on the vast amount of time he devoted to traipsing all over Brazil ahead of the 2014 World Cup. Surely, I asked, the secretary-general had many other important demands on his agenda?

"No," replied Valcke. "It's like this: 95% of our revenue comes from the World Cup. Nothing is anywhere near as important, so absolutely nothing can be left to chance."

Infantino can argue the same. He certainly needs to remain in Trump's good books until the World Cup trophy is handed over in the MetLife Stadium next July. If Trump is not merely being capricious with his host city jibes then FIFA and Infantino will likely kowtow. The US is not short of suitable alternative venues after all.

FIFA will do whatever it takes to stay onside with the unpredictable leader of the central host of what will be a record-breaking expanded World Cup. This is not only in the interest of the FIFA World Cup itself but Infantino politically. An estimated two thirds of FIFA's 211 members associations are reliant on the roughly $2m handed down from Zurich every year. They need Infantino to ensure the financial success of the World Cup.

If he succeeds, and the 2026 World Cup generates ever-larger income – and resultantly largesse – then plenty of FAs could press FIFA Congress to scrap the three-term constraint on its president. Not MAGA, but MIGA: Make Infantino Great Again...and again, and again.

Rumbelows Cup draw...Trump's first foray into football was way back in December 1991

BOOKS THIS MONTH

SPIRIT OF THE BLUES
By Christopher Beesley (Pitch Publishing, £25)

Spirit of the Blues: Everton's Most Memorable Matches and Goodison Park's Greatest Games is the definitive story of Everton's 133 years at Goodison Park, told with help from those who were there. Chronicling golden eras, landmark moments, Merseyside derbies, quirky stories and goals galore – from Goodison's first fixture in 1892 to its final one in 2025 – it's a must-read for every Everton supporter.

DALGLISH
By Tom Brogan (Pitch Publishing, £18.99)

Dalglish: The Fifty Matches that Made the Player explores the legendary Kenny Dalglish's playing career in 50 key games for Celtic, Liverpool and Scotland. Learn about the pivotal matches in his career as well as the important relationships Kenny built with managers, coaches and team-mates that helped fuel his extraordinary footballing success.

Jonathan WILSON
TECHNICALLY SPEAKING

The English connection

Graham Potter's appointment by Sweden continues a long link between English coaches and the Scandinavian country

Graham Potter and Sweden. Two damaged souls, seeking in their temporary union some solace.

Potter is not the first manager to be chewed up by West Ham United, but there was a sad sense of finality about his departure: his achievements at Brighton have faded as his successors have thrived, he looked overwhelmed by the Chelsea job and few managers get a fourth chance in the Premier League, not without either tangible achievement or a greater sense of individuality and charisma than he has been blessed with.

Sweden are suffering too, the appointment of the former Denmark striker Jon Dahl Tomasson an almost complete failure. He was sacked following a pair of defeats to Kosovo, which really shouldn't happen to a squad that includes players of such talent as Alexander Isak, Viktor Gyokeres, Anthony Elanga and Lucas Bergvall.

Potter, of course, has a track record in Swedish football, having led Ostersund from obscurity to cup glory in 2016-17. But the affinity goes much deeper than that. The English influence over Swedish football runs deep. George Raynor, who led Sweden to Olympic gold in 1948 and to the World Cup final ten years later, was born near Barnsley and played for Mansfield Town, Rotherham United, Bury and Aldershot.

Yet Raynor's tactical influence was probably less than the many Hungarian émigrés working in Scandinavia at the time. The real tactical shift towards an English model came in the 1970s.

Swedish football had become very focused on a German-style *Libero* when Bob Houghton first arrived at Malmo in 1974. He had been on Fulham's books, but had never played for them and his career as a player never achieved greater heights than Hastings. But he had attended the training course run by the FA technical director Allen Wade, which was pioneering in the way it attempted to break the game down into its component parts and to focus training on the sort of situations that might actually occur in games. It was a very English way of looking at the game: pragmatic, empirical, rooted in 4-4-2 and zonal-marking, and broadly devoid of theory.

New appointment ...Potter is unveiled as Sweden manager

The English influence over Swedish football runs deep

Houghton became player-manager of Hastings at the age of 22, moved into a similar role at Maidstone and then became Bobby Robson's assistant at Ipswich Town before making the switch to southern Sweden aged 26. He was younger than many of his players and the style he wanted to play was alien to them, but he was a persuasive speaker and soon achieved buy-in. Three league titles followed in the following four seasons before leading them to the European Cup final in 1979.

By then, Houghton had recommended Roy Hodgson,

English influence... Roy Hodgson also moved to Sweden as a young coach

his friend and former team-mate at Maidstone, to Halmstad. Initially, he later said, he had been looking for an ally so that he wouldn't have to fight the tactical war alone, but he soon realised he had actually anointed a rival. Halmstad won the league in 1976, Hodgson's first season in Sweden. Between them, Hodgson and Houghton changed the face of Swedish football.

"Instead of playing with a team that was very spread out from one end of the field to the other, with a *Libero* who stays in his penalty area and a centre-forward who never tracks back," Houghton explained in an interview with *The Blizzard*, "we set up a system of zonal defence, a back four, people pushing up and, of course, getting the ball forward into the final area much more quickly."

Journalists decried a more direct style of play and sneered at the way the midfield was bypassed so often; Houghton and Hodgson pointed to the fact that in seven years they had won six league titles between them.

Lars Arnesson, Sweden manager from 1980 to 1985, was vehemently opposed to 4-4-2 and even persuaded the Swedish football federation to issue a declaration of "how football should be played" – which is to say, the West German way.

However, slowly, Sweden began to accept that the new approach was effective. Other coaches began to take note, among them a young Sven-Goran Eriksson, who won a league title and a UEFA Cup with IFK Goteborg in 1982 before leaving for further success with Benfica.

For a long time afterwards, Sweden was a devoted 4-4-2 country, so adept at their adopted style that they went 12 international games unbeaten against England between 1979 and 2011. That may have begun to change but the affinities and synergies continue to exist. Potter will be hoping to reawaken the spirit that brought success at Ostersund, but he is also tapping into a far deeper tradition.

Viktor DADASON

(FC Copenhagen)

Wunderkind Icelandic striker Dadason, 17, left hometown club Fram Reykjavik in 2024 to join Danish giants FC Copenhagen, and made his debut for the club in October after impressing for the Under-19s. He got an assist in that game but four days later went even better, coming off the bench against Borussia Dortmund and scoring with a well-taken header to become the UEFA Champions League's third-youngest scorer of all time. Standing at 6ft 3in tall, it is no surprise that he offers such an aerial threat.

Copenhagen have already tied him down to a long-term contract, and his manager Jacob Neestrup believes there is plenty more to come. "The other day he got an assist and today a goal. If he can keep that average in just 65 minutes of playing time, then it looks really promising," he said after the Dortmund game. "It's not the last we have seen of him."

Joaquin PANICHELLI
(Strasbourg)
Chelsea will, undoubtedly be keeping an eye on another promising striker at their sister club. The Argentine scored six goals in four Ligue 1 games in October, including a brace v PSG.

Eder SARABIA
(Elche)
The latest in a long line of exciting Basque-born coaches, Sarabia and his Elche side have lit up La Liga with their entertaining brand of football. The 44-year-old took charge of the side last season and led them to promotion.

Julio VELAZQUEZ
(Levski Sofia)
Ludogorets' dominance of Bulgarian football could come to an end thanks to Levski and their Spanish coach. Since his appointment in January, they have been the country's in-form team and took an early lead atop the table.

Said EL MALA
(Cologne)
The Golden Boot winner at the summer's European U19 Championship with four goals and two assists has been compared to former Cologne star Lukas Podolski for his displays this campaign. The winger spent last season on loan at Viktoria Cologne in the third tier.

Jim HOLDEN

AT THE HEART OF THE GAME

The heat is on

FIFA must enforce sensible kick-off times at the 2026 World Cup to avoid dangerous conditions

The warnings from climate experts about the dangers of extreme heat at the 2026 World Cup are stark. They fear the risk of a "sporting tragedy".

Serious alarm was also sounded by the experience of players at the Club World Cup a few months ago. Enzo Fernandez, the dynamic Chelsea and Argentina midfielder, called the conditions "very dangerous" after becoming dizzy during the semi-final against Fluminense.

It was 35°C at kick-off for that Chelsea match in New Jersey. In June 2024, a heat wave took temperatures into the 40s in some cities in the USA and to 50°C in Mexico. An assistant referee collapsed due to the oppressive weather conditions in the Copa America tournament played that summer.

The issue of extreme heat affecting the World Cup is real, and it must be confronted by FIFA and everyone who loves the game. One thing is abundantly clear: the welfare of players must be paramount and above insistent commercial pressures.

It must certainly be above the desire of football fans sitting at home in the comfort of their armchairs to watch matches during prime-time TV hours. If a crucial showdown must be played after midnight European time, so be it – however inconvenient or disappointing for television viewers that may be. What do they want? Footballers, officials and spectators in the stadia to suffer cruelly in extreme heat, or worse?

I have seen how grotesque sport can be. In a lifetime reporting on international events, the hottest conditions I have encountered was a cricket match between India and England in the city of Jamshedpur. The temperature was 47°C, but they kept on playing. It was inhumane. Players were hooked up to drips in the dressing room when not on the field of play.

We should pay heed to the experts, like Friederike Otto, a climatologist at Imperial College in London, who says: "If you don't want to have players and fans die from heatstroke or get severely ill with heat exhaustion, then matches should be played in the hours of early morning and late evening."

A similar message is delivered by Piers Forster, professor of Physical Climate Change at University of Leeds, who warns: "I'm getting increasingly worried that we are only one heat wave away from a sporting tragedy. The risk will only become greater in years ahead without considering more dramatic measures such as playing in winter months and/or cooler latitudes."

FIFA, at the time of writing, had not revealed details of contingency planning for extreme heat conditions at next summer's World Cup, but said they are actively working on it.

Gianni Infantino, president of FIFA, speaking at a conference in Rome a few weeks ago, said: "I think it's not just about one World Cup. Even to play in some European countries in July, it's very hot. We are discussing all the time and there are ways we can optimise the calendar. We will see when we can come to some conclusion, but we must have an open mind."

That's encouraging to an extent. An open mind is one thing, finding a solution is quite another. Every section of the football world wants more games to drive commercial revenue. The World Cup, Champions League and Club World Cup have all expanded, increasing the intense pressure on players. There are too many matches, and too many injuries as a consequence.

Player welfare is a fundamental issue across all sports. Tennis players and cricketers complain about relentless schedules and the burnout caused by competing when bodies are exhausted.

Nothing is bigger in global sport, though, than the football World Cup. Next summer's tournament must show the way forward by putting player welfare first right now.

Sure, money talks loud in modern sport, louder than anything. But it's time for it to whisper a little. It's time to shout some common sense, and for television companies and armchair fans to play their part too without complaint.

Heat wave...Bayern Munich's Sacha Boey attempts to cool himself down during the FIFA Club World Cup

> One thing is abundantly clear: the welfare of players must be paramount

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OBITUARIES

Arsenal defender ...Willie Young

Willie YOUNG (1951-2025)
Scottish defender who formed a formidable partnership with David O'Leary in an Arsenal back-line that reached three FA Cup finals in a row between 1978 and 1980, lifting the trophy in 1979. The ex-Aberdeen man joined the Gunners from North London rivals Tottenham Hotspur in 1977, making the switch a few months before Pat Jennings. Young then spent two years under Brian Clough at Nottingham Forest before spells at Norwich City, Brighton and Darlington, retiring in 1984. A tough and imposing central defender, he would almost certainly have won numerous Scotland caps, but was banned after being involved in an altercation on a night out in Copenhagen, which also ended the international career of Billy Bremner.

Mladen ZIZOVIC (1980-2025)
The head coach of Serbian side Radnicki 1923 passed away after collapsing during his side's league match against Mladost Lucani. A former midfielder, he won two caps for Bosnia & Herzegovina.

Jose Manuel OCHOTORENA (1961–2025)
A talented Basque goalkeeper who won the Spanish title and UEFA Cup with Real Madrid, and the Zamora Trophy while at Valencia, as well as playing for Tenerife, Logrones and Racing Santander. A non-playing member of Spain's 1990 World Cup squad after winning his sole cap a year earlier. Later worked as a goalkeeper coach, including three years at Liverpool and as a member of Spain's coaching staff at the successful 2010 World Cup and Euro 2008 and 2012 campaigns.

Mick McNEIL (1940–2025)
Called up at left-back by England in 1960-61 when Walter Winterbottom adopted a 4-2-4 formation with instant success. McNeil, despite being a Second Division footballer, won nine caps while playing 193 games for hometown club Middlesbrough and 173 times for Ipswich.

1999 Confederations Cup winner...Lapuente

Goalkeeper coach ...Ochotorena at Valencia in 2015

Miguel Angel RUSSO (1956-2025)
One-club man as a player for Estudiantes, and a long-serving coach, most recently at Boca Juniors (full tribute on page 52).

Wake NIBOMBE (1974-2025)
Goalkeeper in Togo's squad at both the 1998 and 2000 AFCONs, winning 54 caps. Returned to the national team as a goalkeeper coach for the 2010 finals in Angola, and was shot in the knee in the terrorist attack on the national team bus.

Otto FRASSDORF (1942-2025)
Attacking right-back for Vorwarts Berlin during the 1960s, nicknamed the "East German Facchetti." A four-time GDR league champion, before retiring at the age of 29 due to injury in 1971. Frassdorf was a member of the unified Germany side that won bronze at the 1964 Tokyo Olympics and scored four goals in 33 caps for the East Germany national team.

Manuel LAPUENTE (1944–2025)
Versatile forward who scored five goals for Mexico in 13 games between 1967 and 1973, and later coached *El Tri* to success at the 1998 CONCACAF Gold Cup and 1999 FIFA Confederations Cup.

Gino PIVATELLI (1933-2025)
European champion with Milan in 1963. Made his Serie B debut for Verona aged 17 after being released by Internazionale. He joined Bologna in 1953 and topped the Serie A scoring charts in 1955-56 – the only Italian player to do so during the 1950s. Moved to Napoli in 1960 and then, in 1961, to Milan where Nereo Rocco converted him from centre-forward into a utility player. Pivatelli was surprisingly picked in place of winger Paolo Barison for the 1963 European Cup final against Benfica at Wembley, tasked with marking Benfica playmaker Mario Coluna. His late tackle early in the second half reduced Coluna to half-pace and Milan, a goal down at half-time, recovered to win 2-1.

Marvin BROWN (1983-2025)
Bristol City's youngest-ever player on his debut in September 1999 aged 16 years and 71 days, who played for England at U16 and U17 level. Founded Total Pro Soccer, a Bristol-based youth development project, and is credited with developing the likes of Antoine Semenyo, Bobby Decordova-Reid and Tommy Conway.

Bristol City record-breaker ...Marvin Brown

Max LORENZ (1939-2025)
One of the pillars of Werder Bremen between 1960 and 1969, winning the cup in 1961 and the Bundesliga in 1965. An unused member of West Germany's runners-up squad at the 1966 World Cup then called up again for the 1970 finals. His substitute appearance in the 1-0 win over Uruguay in the third-place play-off was the last of his 19 caps.

Colin ADDISON (1940-2025)
A forward or midfielder for York City, Nottingham Forest, Arsenal, Sheffield United and Hereford United. His greatest claim to fame came as player-manager of the latter, overseeing their famous FA Cup win over Newcastle United thanks to Ronnie Radford's long-range strike. Yet that proved to be just the start of a 30-year managerial career that took him to several clubs including Derby County, Celta Vigo, Atletico Madrid and Swansea City, as well as West Bromwich Albion as assistant to Ron Atkinson.

Dinny LOWRY (1934-2025)
Goalkeeper for a remarkable 17 years at St Patrick's Athletic, with whom he won two League of Ireland titles and two FAI Cups. Won another FAI Cup in two further seasons at Bohemians. Earned his sole international cap as a substitute against Austria in 1962.

Gyorgy MEZEY (1941-2025)
Mezey's career in Hungarian football reached a peak as coach of the national team for three years up to the disastrous 1986 World Cup in Mexico, which saw them lose 6-0 to the Soviet Union.

Ivan ZAFIROV (1947-2025)
Right-back who won nine titles and five cups for CSKA Sofia at the height of their powers. Played 50 games for Bulgaria and was part of the silver medal-winning team at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico.

Viktor SHUSTIKOV (1939-2025)
Soviet Union defender who played 427 times for Torpedo Moscow from 1958 to 1974 – second only in the Soviet League behind Oleh Blokhin. A member of the USSR team beaten 2-1 by Spain in the 1964 European Championship final.

Shraga BAR (1948-2025)
German-born Israel defender who featured in Mexico at both the 1968 Olympic Games and 1970 World Cup.

Dobromir ZHECHEV (1942-2025)
Centre-back or midfielder for Bulgaria whose World Cup record included a rugged policing of Pele at the 1966 finals in England.

Words by Keir Radnedge & Jamie Evans

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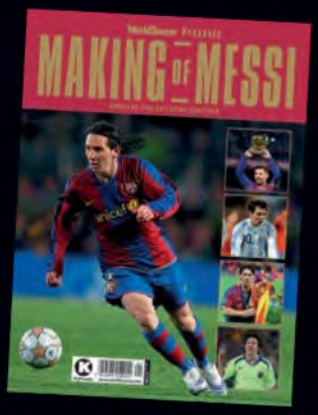

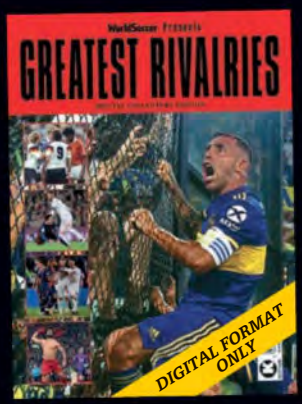

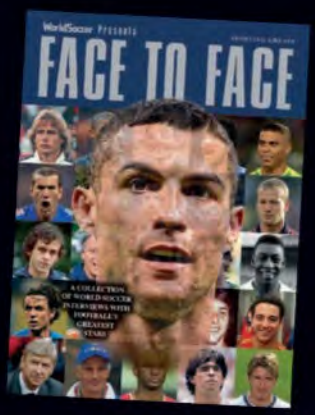

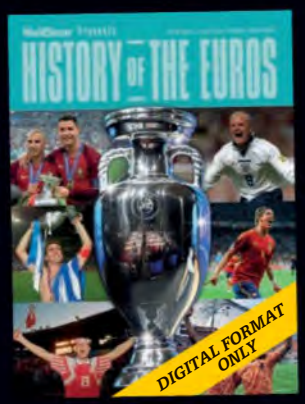

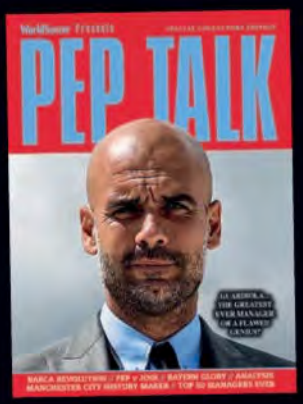

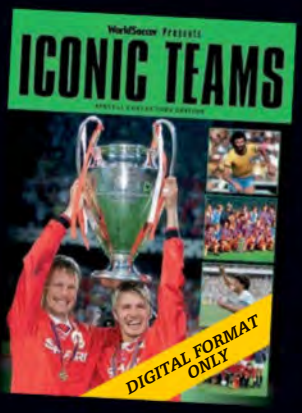

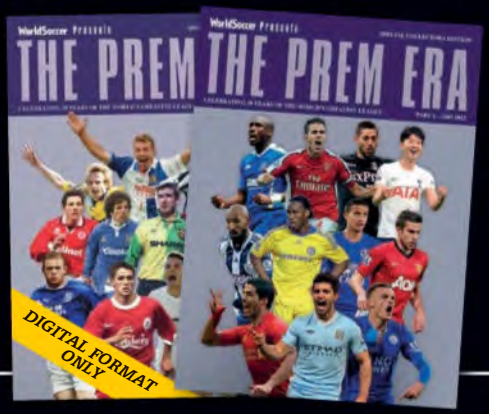

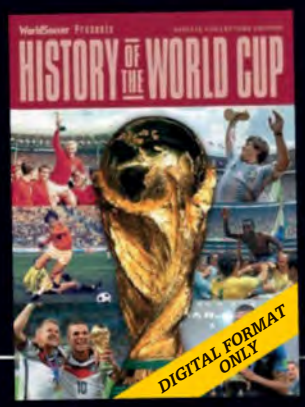

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"Today, Spanish football has lost an opportunity to advance, project itself globally, and strengthen its future"

La Liga president Javier Tebas reacts after the proposed Villarreal v Barcelona clash in Miami was cancelled

12 MOVES *you might have missed...*

TRANSFERS ★ LOANS ★ SACKINGS ★ HIRINGS ★ SWITCHES ★ RETIREMENTS

Aaron RAMSEY

The Wales captain quit Liga MX side **Pumas** after just six games following the disappearance of his dog. In a statement, Ramsey said the loss of the pet would "haunt" his family.

Hakim ZIYECH

In one of the biggest moves in the history of Moroccan football, the former Chelsea playmaker joined **Wydad Casablanca** after five months as a free agent.

Tom LOCKYER

The former Luton Town defender, whose career appeared to be over after suffering a cardiac arrest on the pitch, restarted his career at former club **Bristol Rovers**.

Josh DASILVA

Another player whose career seemed to have been ended by injury, the midfielder was rewarded with a new contract by **Brentford** having not played since early 2024.

Luciano SPALLETTI

Juventus moved quickly to replace Igor Tudor after ending the Croatian's tenure at seven months. A *Scudetto* winner with Napoli in 2023, Spalletti departed the Italy job in June.

Rafael BENITEZ

The veteran Spanish coach took on the 15th managerial role of his career at **Panathinaikos**, with the 20-time champions struggling in this season's Greek Super League.

Sebastien POCOGNOLI

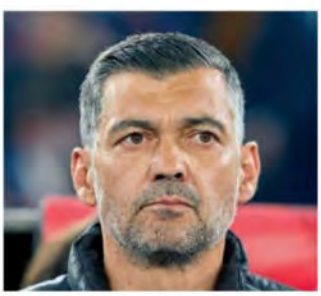
Union Saint-Gilloise's title-winning coach was poached by **Monaco** after the Ligue 1 side sacked Adi Hutter. Union replaced Pocognoli with OH Leuven's David Hubert.

Patrick VIEIRA

After only managing one win in their first ten Serie A games this season, **Genoa** parted company with their French head coach less than a year after appointing him.

Stefano PIOLI

Following an even worse start than Vieira's Genoa, Pioli was sacked as **Fiorentina** head coach after failing to win any of his first ten Serie A games of the 2025-26 season.



Sergio CONCEICAO

The former Porto and Milan head coach became the latest European to head to the Saudi Pro League, replacing the sacked Laurent Blanc as manager of **Al Ittihad**.

Will STILL

The 33-year-old coach, highly rated for his work at Reims and Lens, was sacked by Championship strugglers **Southampton** just five months into his first job in English football.

Brad GUZAN

The **Atlanta United** goalkeeper called time on his career at the end of the 2025 MLS season aged 41. A former US international, he played over 150 Premier League games.

OCTOBER 2025

ESM XI

EUROPEAN SPORTS MEDIA

SEASON RANKINGS
Cumulative votes through the season

GOALKEEPERS

David Raya (Arsenal)	8
Gianluigi Donnarumma (Man City)	2
Mile Svilar (Roma)	2
Alisson (Liverpool)	1
Lucas Chevalier (PSG)	1
Thibaut Courtois (Real Madrid)	1
Peter Gulacsi (RB Leipzig)	1
Dean Henderson (Crystal Palace)	1
Manuel Neuer (Bayern Munich)	1
Geronimo Rulli (Marseille)	1
Yann Sommer (Internazionale)	1

DEFENDERS

Gabriel (Arsenal)	13
Nuno Mendes (PSG)	10
Achraf Hakimi (PSG)	6
Konrad Laimer (Bayern Munich)	6
Virgil van Dijk (Liverpool)	6
Alex Grimaldo (Bayer Leverkusen)	3
Marc Guehi (Crystal Palace)	3
Gianluca Mancini (Roma)	3
Eder Militao (Real Madrid)	3
Alessandro Bastoni (Internazionale)	2
Riccardo Calafiori (Arsenal)	2
Denzel Dumfries (Internazionale)	2
Jules Kounde (Barcelona)	2
Jurrien Timber (Arsenal)	2
Illia Zabarnyi (PSG)	2
Nayef Aguerd (Marseille)	1
Manuel Akanji (Internazionale)	1
Alvaro Carreras (Real Madrid)	1
Zeki Celik (Roma)	1
Marc Cucurella (Chelsea)	1
Robin Le Normand (Atletico Madrid)	1
Harry Maguire (Manchester United)	1
Marquinhos (PSG)	1
William Saliba (Arsenal)	1
Jonathan Tah (Bayern Munich)	1
Dayot Upamecano (Bayern Munich)	1
Micky van de Ven (Tottenham Hotspur)	1

MIDFIELDERS

Michael Olise (Bayern Munich)	6
Jude Bellingham (Real Madrid)	5
Pedri (Barcelona)	5
Declan Rice (Arsenal)	5
Luka Modric (Milan)	4
Christian Pulisic (Milan)	4
Vitinha (PSG)	4
Arda Guler (Real Madrid)	3
Joshua Kimmich (Bayern Munich)	3
Martin Zubimendi (Arsenal)	3
Christoph Baumgartner (RB Leipzig)	2
Ryan Gravenberch (Liverpool)	2
Andre-Frank Zambo Anguissa (Napoli)	2
Nicolo Barella (Internazionale)	1
Pablo Barrios (Atletico Madrid)	1
Moises Caicedo (Chelsea)	1
Hakan Calhanoglu (Internazionale)	1
Kevin De Bruyne (Napoli)	1
Eberechi Eze (Arsenal)	1
Bruno Fernandes (Manchester United)	1
Fermin Lopez (Barcelona)	1
Scott McTominay (Napoli)	1
Felix Nmecha (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Nico Paz (Como)	1
Tijjani Reijnders (Manchester City)	1
Ismael Saibari (PSV)	1
Matias Soule (Roma)	1
Dominik Szoboszlai (Liverpool)	1

FORWARDS

Harry Kane (Bayern Munich)	19
Kylian Mbappe (Real Madrid)	18
Erling Haaland (Manchester City)	12
Julian Alvarez (Atletico Madrid)	2
Karim Adeyemi (Borussia Dortmund)	1
Desire Doue (PSG)	1
Lautaro Martinez (Internazionale)	1
Bryan Mbeumo (Manchester United)	1
Marcus Rashford (Barcelona)	1
Bukayo Saka (Arsenal)	1
Antoine Semenyo (Bournemouth)	1
Can Uzun (Eintracht Frankfurt)	1
Lamine Yamal (Barcelona)	1

ESM MEMBERS: *A Bola* (Portugal), *Fanatik* (Turkey), *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* (Germany), *La Gazzetta dello Sport* (Italy), *Kicker* (Germany), *Marca* (Spain), *Nemzeti Sport* (Hungary), *De Telegraaf* (Netherlands), *Tipsbladet* (Denmark), *ELF Voetbal* (Netherlands), *World Soccer* (England)

The month in numbers

The facts and stats that have caught our eye in the world of football this month...

18
Age of Lamine Yamal when he was picked for this year's FIFPRO Men's World XI, the youngest-ever player to be selected. The previous record holder was Kylian Mbappe, who also made this year's XI.

6
England players represented in the FIFPRO Women's World XI: goalkeeper Hannah Hampton, defenders Lucy Bronze, Millie Bright and Leah Williamson, and forwards Chloe Kelly and Alessia Russo.

88
England caps won by centre-back Bright, who recently announced her international retirement.

17
Years and 242 days, the age of Bayern Munich's Lennart Karl when he scored against Club Brugge to become the youngest-ever German to net in the Champions League.

Record-breaker... Lennart Karl

13
Previous record of consecutive wins in all competitions to open a European campaign – set by Fabio Capello's Milan back in 1992-93 – which was overtaken by Bayern who, at the time of writing, had clocked up 16 wins in 2025-26.

6
Copa Libertadores Femenina titles won by Corinthians, who claimed their third consecutive crown in October (more on page 79).

$20 million
Investment by the Saudi Tourism Authority in the OFC Pro League, the first-ever professional club competition in Oceania, ahead of its January launch (see page 90).

Svenska Mästare... Swedish champions

67
Previous record points tally in the Swedish league – set by Malmo and AIK in 2010 and 2018 respectively – which was shattered by Mjallby in the 2025 Allsvenskan season, as they broke the 70-point barrier for the first time in the league's history (more on page 42).

2
AFC Player of the Year awards won by Salem Al Dawsari after the Saudi Arabia winger beat Qatar's Akram Afif and Malaysia's Arif Aiman to the 2025 prize.

16
Consecutive wins for Morocco at the conclusion of their World Cup qualifying campaign, a new record for men's international football.

6
Coaches that Sampdoria have had since the start of last season, with the former Italian champions once again struggling in Serie B.

2029
Year that Bayern boss Vincent Kompany's new contract will expire, after the Belgian signed a new deal.

15
Years and 308 days, the age of Arsenal's Max Dowman when he came off the bench against Slavia Prague to become the youngest player in Champions League history.

16
Teams that will play at the 2026 WAFCON in Morocco in March after CAF expanded the competition by four teams. With qualification already concluded, the expansion provided a reprieve for Cameroon, Ivory Coast, Mali and Egypt.

149
Match officials that were banned by the Turkish Football Federation after an investigation revealed that they have active betting accounts.

2028
Year that Lionel Messi's new Inter Miami contract will expire. The Argentina icon signed what is expected to be his final deal with the MLS side in October.

39
World Cup qualifying goals scored by ex-Guatemala striker Carlos Ruiz, a record until he was overtaken by Portugal legend Cristiano Ronaldo.

3
Major European games in which Leandro Andrade has scored within the first minute after the Qarabag midfielder notched inside 48 seconds in his side's Champions League clash with Athletic Club.

6
Number of substitutes that could be allowed per game after a motion was discussed at the European Football Clubs' general assembly.

4
French players to have won the Golden Boy award as Europe's best young player after PSG's Desire Doue claimed the 2025 prize.

1
English players to have won the Golden Girl award after Euro 2025 breakout star Michelle Agyemang was named this year's winner.

363
Bundesliga matches won by keeper Manuel Neuer when overtaking his former team-mate Thomas Muller to set a new league record.

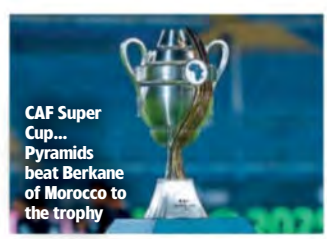
107
Total minutes played in six years at Manchester City by keeper Scott Carson, who hung up his gloves.

5
English league clubs that striker Fabio Borini has played for after the ex-Italy international joined Salford City in League Two.

36
Age of new River Plate chairman Stefano Di Carlo, the youngest man to hold the position in 92 years.

5
Tier of Portuguese football that former champions Boavista were playing at before being forced to withdraw. The club were relegated from the top flight last season and sent down to the fifth tier for failing to meet financial requirements.

3
Trophies won by Egyptian side Pyramids FC in 2025 after they added the CAF Super Cup to the CAF Champions League and the FIFA African-Asian-Pacific Cup.


CAF Super Cup... Pyramids beat Berkane of Morocco to the trophy

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Indonesia

Failure to qualify for the 2026 World Cup brings an end to Patrick Kluivert's time as head coach of the Southeast Asian nation

Patrick Kluivert's appointment as Indonesia head coach in January was met with a lukewarm reception, and there was little outcry over his departure nine months later. What happened in between means that the Dutchman still faces a challenge in getting some of the glitter from his outstanding playing CV to transfer across to his coaching resume.

It's easy to see why the 49-year-old ex-Ajax, Milan and Barcelona forward took the job. The local passion was evident in November 2024 as more than 55,000 supporters inside the Gelora Bung Karno Stadium in Jakarta celebrated a shock 2-0 victory over Saudi Arabia, an Asian powerhouse, in a vital World Cup qualifier. It really did seem as if Team Garuda could make next summer's tournament, a first appearance since the country became independent of the Netherlands in 1945.

The team had moved on from its long-held ambition to win the AFF Championship, a Southeast Asian trophy that had gone to Bangkok, Hanoi, Singapore and Kuala Lumpur but never Jakarta. Indonesia had been in the final no less than six times (out of 15 in total) but had always had to watch others celebrating. Suddenly, the goal had changed; why settle for regional superiority when you could become the first ASEAN team to play at the World Cup for almost 90 years?

The Red and Whites came through the second round of qualification for 2026 to become part of the final 18, chasing Asia's expanded allocation of eight. Indonesia were never going to finish in the top two and qualify directly from the third round, but the victory over Saudi Arabia put them on course for a top-four finish and a place in October's play-offs.

In January, however, Shin Tae-yong, in charge since 2020, was fired. The South Korean was popular because he had presided over the improving results and brought the World Cup into view. But not just results had changed. Due to the country's intense naturalisation programme, the majority of the starting XI were born in the Netherlands with Indonesian heritage.

So, soon after, in came Kluivert. Gone are the days when Asian fans automatically welcome famous names – Jurgen Klinsmann will testify to that after his time in charge of South Korea – especially given the Dutchman's far from glamorous coaching career. His previous job was a five-month stint in charge of Turkish club Adana Demirspor in 2023.

Kluivert's first match in charge was in Australia in March when he unveiled a new, aggressive pressing plan and a desire to have more possession. It started well for a few minutes, then ended with a 5-1 loss. The

Heartbreak... Indonesia have only previously appeared at the World Cup in 1938, then as the Dutch East Indies

> "The defeats against Saudi Arabia and Iraq were bitter lessons, but also reminders of how high our shared dreams are. As head coach, I take full responsibility"
>
> **Patrick Kluivert**

Disappointing reign ...Kluivert won three of his eight games in charge of Indonesia

Netherlands' former record goalscorer returned to a more pragmatic style for successive 1-0 wins over Bahrain and China. Those results meant that a 6-0 loss in Japan, against an experimental home side, was irrelevant, but questions were raised as to just what identity Indonesia now had on and off the pitch.

Still, the World Cup dream remained alive with play-off games against Saudi Arabia and Iraq. The winners of this round-robin group would go to North America while the runners-up would advance to more play-offs.

It was unfortunate that the games were hosted in Jeddah. Erick Thohir, head of the Indonesian federation, protested to FIFA on the appointment of a Kuwaiti referee, fearing regional favouritism. Yet they could have no complaints about the decisions – Indonesia were awarded two penalties – as Saudi Arabia ran out 3-2 winners. Kluivert was criticised for his selections and making substitutes too late. Three days later, a 1-0 defeat to Iraq brought an end to the 2026 World Cup hopes.

Fans and media were not impressed. Politician Habib Syarief Muhammad said that while Kluivert had chemistry with the players, there had been no improvement from the team. "It seems to me that he didn't have a method for motivating the players," he added.

The end came quickly in mid-October. "The Football Association of Indonesia (PSSI) and the coaching team of the Indonesia national team have officially agreed for early termination of cooperation through mutual termination," the federation said in a statement.

"The defeats against Saudi Arabia and Iraq were bitter lessons, but also reminders of how high our shared dreams are," wrote Kluivert, who made 79 appearances for the Netherlands. "As head coach, I take full responsibility."

And he paid the ultimate price. In the end, all parties – PSSI, Kluivert, Shin Tae-yong and the supporters – will wonder what the point of it all was. The next tournament is likely to be the 2026 AFF Championships and while it is not the World Cup, fans would love to win.

John Duerden

Serbia

Painful defeat to Albania signals the end of head coach Dragan Stojkovic's tenure

Devastating defeat ...Dusan Vlahovic reacts during the 1-0 loss to Albania

When Serbia and Albania met at the 8,000-capacity Dubocica Stadium in Leskovac in World Cup qualifying in October, it was always bound to be a game with far-reaching consequences – regardless of the result.

The last time these two Balkan rivals met in Serbia was in 2014. During that politically sensitive Euro 2016 qualifier, a drone towing pro-Albanian sentiments was flown over the Partizan Stadium pitch, sparking a mass brawl.

In an attempt to avoid a repeat, this clash was declared as high-risk and subsequently moved away from Red Star's famously intimidating 50,000 Rajko Mitic Stadium in Belgrade to a sleepy city in southern Serbia.

Tickets for the match were not available for public sale and instead handed out to sponsors, football clubs and regional associations. With local fans on social media pointing out that several internal clashes broke out among the crowd during Serbia's previous home fixture against England, there were rumours that this decision was also made to avoid any further anti-government protests.

On the pitch, Albania claimed a memorable 1-0 win, leading to the immediate resignation of Serbia head coach Dragan Stojkovic at full-time. Speaking to the media after the game, he said: "I personally did not expect this defeat. I am someone who accepts full responsibility and is solely accountable".

The result proved to be the final straw following an uninspiring 15 months for the national team. Serbia's poor showing at Euro 2024 – they finished winless and bottom of their group in Germany – was followed by a UEFA Nations League campaign in which they only remained in League A courtesy of a narrow play-off victory over Austria and then an up-and-down World Cup qualifying campaign.

Many of the problems that had plagued the team under Stojkovic's stewardship were epitomised in his final game in charge. His insistence on a Dusan Vlahovic-Aleksandar Mitrovic front pairing had never proved particularly fruitful, while despite a wealth of attacking talent there were no clear patterns of play to break down a resolute Albanian defence.

From the visitors' perspective, it was vindication for the Albanian Football Federation and their backing of head coach Sylvinho. The jury is still out on the Brazilian, particularly following Albania's relegation from League B to League C after defeats to Georgia, the Czech Republic and Ukraine in last year's Nations League. According to local journalist Dritan Shakohoxha, there is a sense that the former left-back is "far more capable of giving a good interview and articulating his thoughts on the game than being a tactician and leading the team."

But Sylvinho produced a robust and determined response to that criticism with a winning game plan in Leskovac. His side did not just sit in, but pressed Serbia's centre-backs to make it difficult for them to build from the back. Rey Manaj's sweetly-struck volley just before half-time gave them something to hold onto.

Serbia, meanwhile, moved quickly to replace Stojkovic, turning to Veljko Paunovic ten years after he left the federation. In 2015, he led a young Serbian side to victory in the Under-20 World Cup with several players who are now part of the senior squad. Sacked by La Liga side Real Oviedo in October, he will feel that he has unfinished business at home.

Wilf MacDonnell

WORLD CUP WATCH

Jamie Evans picks out some of the main talking points to emerge after the latest wave of teams booked their spots at next year's World Cup

1 MAHREZ'S WORLD CUP DREAM

Riyad Mahrez had a limited impact in qualifying for **Algeria**. He played eight games, but never for longer than 74 minutes, and scored or assisted in just two of them with Wolfsburg's Mohamed Amoura leading the attack with ten goals. After starring in the 3-0 win over Somalia that secured their spot in North America, Mahrez confirmed that next year's World Cup would be his last. The winger might regret never playing at one during his peak years – he made one appearance in 2014, and Algeria have failed to qualify since – but can finally make his mark next summer.

2 DIEGO SIMEONE'S ARGENTINA INFLUENCE

Lionel Scaloni's genius in leading **Argentina** to the 2022 World Cup was in convincing the other outfield players to commit entirely to getting the very best out of Lionel Messi. Fortunately, Argentina are not short on players who have the energy to run, the will to follow a game plan, plus the technical ability to give their captain the ball and then convert the chances he creates; in other words, exactly the kind of players that Diego Simeone adores. It is not by chance that so many of Messi's team-mates next summer will be current or former Atletico Madrid players, such as Rodrigo De Paul, Julian Alvarez, Thiago Almada and Nico Gonzalez, plus Diego's son Giuliano.

3 POPOVIC AIMS FOR WORLD CUP REDEMPTION

Australia head coach Tony Popovic will have mixed memories of the 2006 World Cup. Although he was a senior member of the squad that made it to the knockout rounds, a calf injury picked up during the group stage meant he missed the final group game and the controversial last-16 defeat to Italy. His tenure as manager of the Socceroos began with an 11-game unbeaten run – only Terry Venables has made a better start with the team – which was ended in October. This is a young Australia squad with the likes of Nestory Irankunda (19), Mo Toure (21) and Jordan Bos (23) beginning to make it their own. Who better to lead them than a member of Australia's last golden generation?

4 JAMES' LAST DANCE

James Rodriguez will turn 35 a week before next summer's World Cup final, 12 years on from winning the Golden Boot at the 2014 finals. Since then, it has not always been smooth sailing for the **Colombia** playmaker, but with seven assists in qualifying, more than any other South American, he is once again the man the team is built around. Coach Nestor Lorenzo eventually settled on James as the No.10 in a 4-2-3-1 formation, and stuck with that shape in a 4-0 friendly win over Mexico when James set up two. With willing runners around him and prominent targets to aim at from set-pieces, the former Real Madrid and Bayern Munich man is always a threat.

5 DEFENSIVE DEMONS

Ecuador only conceded five goals in 18 games during qualifying, and just two under new head coach Sebastian Beccacece, ending with five clean sheets in a row. This is not a simple case of setting up defensively; Beccacece is blessed with several top-class defenders playing at top European clubs in Piero Hincapie (Arsenal), Willian Pacho (Paris Saint-Germain) and Pervis Estupinan (Milan), protected by a world-class defensive midfielder in Chelsea's Moises Caicedo (all of whom – bar Estupinan – were produced by Independiente del Valle's extraordinary academy system). With such solid foundations, they only need a little more in attack to be contenders.

6 BRAZIL'S ENGLISH ERA

Since CONMEBOL'S switch to a single league table format for World Cup qualifying ahead of the 1998 finals, **Brazil** have never previously finished outside the top three. In fact, they have only failed to top the table once, so lying all the way down in fifth this time should be a jolt to the system. Carlo Ancelotti, clearly still trying to find the right balance, only led the team in four of the qualifiers yet used nearly 40 different players during that time – with more than a quarter of them playing in England. With the likes of Bruno Guimaraes and Lucas Paqueta set for prominent roles under the Italian, Casemiro and Matheus Cunha returning to the national team fold, and youngsters like Estevao and Andrey Santos given their opportunites, the *Selecao's* Premier League contingent has never been so prominent.

7 CANADA TURN TO DIASPORA

A serious injury to centre-back Moise Bombito, who could miss the World Cup after fracturing a tibia while playing for Nice, has prompted co-hosts **Canada** to look to the diaspora. English-born Middlesbrough defender Alfie Jones, who qualifies for the nation through a grandparent, was called up for the November games, while head coach Jesse Marsch has also been attempting to recruit former Arsenal youngster Marcelo Flores. The attacking midfielder was born in Canada but has three Mexico caps and plays for Tigres.

8 EGYPT'S WORLD CUP DOUBLE ACT

Mohamed Salah has unfinished business with the World Cup. He wasn't fully fit for Russia 2018, and then missed from the spot as **Egypt** were beaten on penalties by Senegal in qualifying for Qatar. Often crowded out by opposition defences who know that stopping him means stopping Egypt, he will be able to share the attacking load next summer with Omar Marmoush. Yet the duo only started five qualifiers together and rarely in a consistent shape, with the Manchester City man moved from midfield to left wing to centre-forward. Head coach and national team legend Hossam Hassan must find a way to get the best out of the both of them.

9 GHANA'S STARS YET TO GEL

As **Ghana** confirmed themselves as Africa's fifth automatic World Cup qualifiers out of nine in October, one of their players, Antoine Semenyo, was second in the Premier League scoring charts, another, Mohammed Kudus, was joint top for assists, while a third, Inaki Williams, had played twice in this season's Champions League. None of that trio, though, have yet hit peak form for Ghana, with 34-year-old captain Jordan Ayew their top scorer in qualifying with seven goals. Coach Otto Addo has spoken of his front players' need to find a "better connection", as the nation bids to put recent AFCON traumas – they crashed out in the 2023 group stage and failed to qualify for 2025 – firmly behind them.

10 KONSA IN POLE POSITION?

The only defender to play in all of **England**'s first six World Cup qualifiers as they became the first European side to secure qualification – and without conceding a single goal in the process – Aston Villa's Ezri Konsa may have leap-frogged John Stones and Marc Guehi to become Thomas Tuchel's first-choice centre-back. He even played alongside those two as a right-back in the 3-0 friendly victory over Wales in October, suggesting that the German coach is keen to include Konsa however he can. Providing the recovery pace that used to make Kyle Walker such a valuable part of the England back-line, it is no exaggeration to suggest that the 28-year-old might be a guaranteed starter next summer.

11 ANOTHER COACHING CHANGE FOR IRAN?

Appointed in early 2023 to replace Carlos Queiroz – the team's manager at the last three finals – **Iran** head coach Amir Ghalenoei has his critics. Despite securing qualification all the way back in March, some fans and pundits feel the team simply isn't clicking. Meanwhile, Dragan Skocic, who led the team through qualifying for the 2022 finals but was replaced by Queiroz before he could go to Qatar, responded to his harsh treatment by taking charge of Iranian top-flight club Tractor and leading them to their first-ever league title. Perhaps the Croatian will get a chance at a World Cup finals after all?

12 DIOMANDE BURSTS ONTO THE SCENE

Ivory Coast will travel to Morocco in December to defend their Africa Cup of Nations crown with an exciting new starlet in their ranks: 18-year-old winger Yan Diomande. RB Leipzig have been so pleased with their summer recruit from La Liga side Leganes that they have slapped a €100 million price tag on his head. He made an instant impact for his country as well, scoring on his international debut against Seychelles in a World Cup qualifier in October and then again against Kenya a few days later. Could he be the country's biggest talent since their last World Cup appearance, when the likes of Yaya Toure, Didier Drogba and Salomon Kalou led them to Brazil in 2014?

13 NEW HEIGHTS FOR JAPAN

As well as qualifying for their eighth World Cup in a row, **Japan** are currently enjoying their longest period inside FIFA's top 20 since the rankings were introduced in 1992, and in October they made another slice of history by beating Brazil for the first time in 14 attempts. Over the years, their World Cup squads have featured more and more foreign-based players, and next summer's contingent is sure to be bigger than ever as the J. League continues to prove an attractive market for European clubs. Could coach Hajime Moriyasu become the first-ever Japan manager to win a World Cup knockout match?

14 JORDAN STICKING TO THEIR PRINCIPLES

Jordan have enjoyed unprecedented success over the past two years – as well as qualifying for their first-ever World Cup, they also reached the final of the 2023 Asian Cup – and much of it can be attributed to their attacking trio of Yazan Al Naimat, Ali Olwan and Mousa Al Tamari. Fielded in a variety of formations, they have consistently and evenly shared the goals among themselves. Logic, history and realism would dictate that one of them will likely end up making way for a more defensive option in order to give the team more balance before next summer; romance, ambition and bravery say they should stick with all three and see what happens.

15 IS MORA ALREADY MEXICO'S MAIN MAN?

Mexico never looked back after adding teenage sensation Gilberto Mora to the team during last summer's CONCACAF Gold Cup victory. But since then, and the teenager's transfer to the youth ranks for the Under-20 World Cup, *El Tri* have struggled. Left out of the squad for the ongoing Under-17 World Cup in order to concentrate on the senior team, it is clear that the 17-year-old is already regarded as a key man for the co-hosts. Coach Javier Aguirre has a dilemma: on the one hand, he needs to do what he can to keep a lid on the hype and protect his young prodigy, but on the other he'll also be daring to dream of what his team can achieve on home soil with the wonderkid midfielder involved.

16 BRIGHT FUTURE FOR MOROCCO

It came as little surprise that **Morocco** cruised through qualifying with eight wins out of eight, and they could further cement their status as the dominant force in African football with the AFCON in January. What was less expected was their youngsters' recent performance at the Under-20 World Cup, beating Argentina in the final, suggesting that the future is bright, too. The heroes of 2022 are still just that, but integrating the rising young stars like Othmane Maamma and Yassir Zabiri will be the next challenge for Walid Regragui as he looks to add impetus to his squad.

17 ALL WHITES ON TOUR

No team in the world experiences a step-up in quality from qualifying to the real thing quite like **New Zealand**. Since seeing off the rest of Oceania back in March, the All Whites have been travelling the world testing themselves against tougher opponents with mixed results. They defeated African champions Ivory Coast in June, suffered defeats to Ukraine, Australia (twice) and Poland, and then drew with a weakened Norway side before ending the year in the United States with games against Colombia and Ecuador. The results are largely irrelevant; this is a process of acclimatisation that head coach Darren Bazeley will hope stands his side in good stead for the finals next summer.

18 PARAGUAY A POOR MAN'S ECUADOR

Like Ecuador, **Paraguay** qualified for this World Cup – their first since 2010 – thanks to an Argentine coach who built a side with solid defensive foundations, knitting together an impressive run of clean sheets (four in their last six qualifiers), and only scoring 14 goals. Head coach Gustavo Alfaro, who incidentally led Ecuador at the last World Cup, has a less gilded back-line at his disposal than the Ecuadorians – the quadruplet that carried them through qualifying play their club football with Sunderland, Atletico Mineiro, Dynamo Moscow and Palmeiras – but it's solid, streetwise and well-drilled.

19 *BAFANA BAFANA* AVOID EMBARRASSMENT

South Africa's return to the World Cup for the first time since hosting the tournament in 2010, and their first successful qualifying campaign since 2002, was met more with sighs of relief than shouts of jubilation. *Bafana Bafana* should have wrapped up Group C's top spot far more comfortably, but a three-point deduction incurred for fielding midfielder Teboho Mokoena against Lesotho when he should have been suspended almost cost them. Thankfully for Hugo Broos and his side, a 3-0 win over Rwanda on the final day ensured that they pipped Nigeria and Benin to top spot by a single point.

20 NO MORE HOME HELP FOR QATAR

Qatar successfully navigated a World Cup qualifying campaign for the first time in their history, but still needed a healthy dose of home advantage to do so. Not only did they host all of their third-round matches, they also had a longer rest between games than their opponents. At some point, the Maroons have to prove themselves outside the Middle East. They won their first Asian Cup in the United Arab Emirates in 2019 and their second on home soil five years later, while their trips to compete in the Copa America and CONCACAF Gold Cup (twice) yielded four wins from 12 matches. Their next test? The FIFA Arab Cup, to be played in – yep, you guessed it – Qatar.

21 AL DAWSARI THE BEST IN ASIA

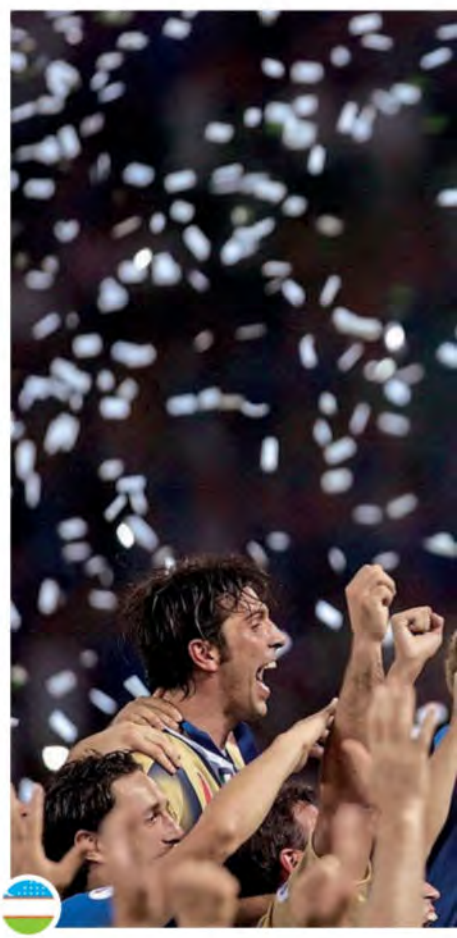
Saudi Arabia captain Salem Al Dawsari occupies a curious space in the football landscape. Recently named the 2025 Asian Player of the Year, he has been a consistent performer over recent years and has a reasonable claim to be Saudi Arabia's greatest-ever player. Yet the rewards on offer in the Saudi Pro League means he has never been tempted by a move abroad, other than a single game in La Liga on loan at Villarreal in 2018. Now 34, the winger, who scored at both of the last two tournaments including against Argentina in 2022, has one more chance to showcase himself on the biggest stage.

22 MANE BACK IN THE FOLD

Senegal made a massive statement in the summer by becoming the first team to beat Thomas Tuchel's England – indeed, the first-ever African team to defeat the Three Lions. The 3-1 victory in Nottingham was made all the more impressive by the absence of their talismanic captain Sadio Mane, who asked to miss the friendly following excessive online abuse. "I think I'm the most criticised player in Senegal," he said. The 33-year-old returned to the squad in September and was then back among the goals in October, scoring in the wins over both South Sudan and Mauritania. Everyone in the Senegalese camp will hope that brings the tension between the player and the fans to an end.

23 CASTROP MAKES HISTORY FOR SOUTH KOREA

In the modern game, plenty of national teams think little of turning to players born abroad, but in **South Korea** it is practically unheard of. Or at least it was before September, when Jens Castrop became the first foreign-born player of mixed heritage to represent the national team. Born in Germany to a Korean mother, the Monchengladbach midfielder won Germany youth caps at every level from Under-16 to Under-21 before switching his allegiance in the summer. A lack of players from Europe's top-five leagues is frequently cited as a reason for the Taegeuk Warriors failings at the World Cup since they reached the semi-finals on home soil in 2002, and Castrop looks set to stay in camp.



24 SAME OLD STORY?

North Africans **Tunisia** cruised through their qualifying campaign almost perfectly, winning nine out of ten games without conceding a single goal. Impressive, yes, but not new; they conceded just twice en route to Qatar, only to then exit at the group stage with just one goal to their credit. That was scored by Wahbi Khazri, who retired shortly afterwards and too often was their only attacking outlet. Much more ambition will be required from the class of 2026, which will be led by Burnley's Hannibal Mejbri and Paris Saint-Germain academy graduate Ismael Gharbi, who now plies his trade with Augsburg on loan from Braga.

25 POCHETTINO FINDS A PLAYMAKER

Mauricio Pochettino is not short of hard-working, high-pressing, athletic midfielders, but those with the technique to carve open defences have proven far harder to find. The question of who should play No.10 for the **United States** has been a recurring talking point among fans, but seems to have been answered by Malik Tillman. The German-born midfielder, a graduate of Bayern Munich's academy, operates at a technical and tactical level that is beyond his team-mates who grew up in the US. He returned to Germany in the summer, joining Bayer Leverkusen from PSV, and recently declared that the move was a driven by a desire to play at the highest level ahead of the World Cup.

26 BIELSA'S STRIKER SEARCH

Uruguay's tally of 22 goals in qualifying was their joint-lowest since the 2002 campaign, which is unsurprising given it was the first time since then to feature neither Diego Forlan nor Edinson Cavani, while record goalscorer Luis Suarez only played twice, including his farewell game. For all his merits, Darwin Nunez has proven that he is not a reliable finisher in the same way that his predecessors were, so manager Marcelo Bielsa has a few months to find more attacking firepower, and he has turned to a pair of domestic-based 17-year-olds in Nicolas Azambuja and Facundo Martinez.

27 UZBEKS ADD WORLD CUP PEDIGREE

Uzbekistan reached their first-ever World Cup finals thanks to two coaches: the experienced Slovenian Srecko Katanec, who stepped down due to ill health in January, and Timur Kapadze, who stepped up from the Under-23s to oversee the remaining games. Now, Kapadze will serve as assistant to Italian Fabio Cannavaro, a world champion as a player in 2006. This is the 52-year-old's ninth job in ten years, with a very brief spell with China his only previous international experience. His new role began with a 2-0 win over Kuwait and a 2-1 defeat to Uruguay, and he now has a matter of months to impart as much of his World Cup experience – 18 appearances across four finals – onto his new players.

28 CAPE VERDE MAKE HISTORY

African archipelago **Cape Verde** became the second-smallest country after Iceland to qualify for a World Cup finals. *(Turn over for more...)*

eye witness

Alasdair Howorth reports

CAPE VERDE

World Cup history makers

It's just past 5pm in the noisy Sucupira market on the Rua de Lisboa. The conversations in Creole between aunties are punctuated by car horns, not from impatient drivers but simply friends sharing a greeting. This might be Cape Verde's busiest road, but rarely is anybody in a huge rush, especially today.

Today, traffic is moving even slower than usual. The market stalls and tarps covering them have encroached onto the road, making it a single-track path, and that has been temporarily closed

by the police to allow a couple of small buses to park up. Out of them come the *Tubaroes Azuis* (Blue Sharks), the heroes of Cape Verde who the next day will play the match of their lives: a qualifier against Eswatini, with the chance to reach their first-ever FIFA World Cup on the line. Without hyperbole, many Cape Verdeans have described it as the biggest moment in the country's history.

Most of those in the market look up and smile. Some get up and greet the players, and a couple ask for photos with captain Vozinha or all-time caps holder and record scorer Ryan Mendes as the players make their way through the market. Maria Jose, who runs her own stall, brings out a two-metre tall Cape Verdean flag and waves, chanting: "We're going to win 3-0!"

Yet for the most part, the players are greeted with respectful indifference. It is less than 24 hours until the biggest moment in the country's history and people barely bat an eyelid at the players walking among them. Welcome to Cape Verde.

This is the land of "*Morabeza*". The Creole word roughly translates to hospitality, kindness and a laidback attitude all rolled into one. Put more simply into the nation's unofficial national slogan, it means "no stress". Life is slower here. It has to be. When you are a nation of half a million people spread across ten islands that span an area the size of Florida, it is impossible to move fast.

★

When *World Soccer* arrived ahead of the country's away match against Libya four days earlier, we expected to find Praia rife with tension. Yet, ahead of the midday kick-off, it proved almost impossible to find any groups of people readying themselves to watch the game in the central plateau of the city.

It's not that the people of Praia didn't care about their match against Libya – everyone we spoke to was brimming with excitement. When pressed as to why they weren't already sitting in anticipation of the match, they all said the same thing: "It's too early."

When the game kicked off, there were virtually no fans in the bar in the Praca Alexandre Albuquerque, the main square of Praia's old town. But, over the course of a nerve-racking 3-3 draw, more and more came over to watch until eventually there was no space in the bar and people resorted to either watching from outside or listening to the game on radio.

This in itself posed a problem: those following via radio were roughly 15 seconds ahead of the TV broadcast, so when the TV-watchers saw Willy Semedo score the goal that brought Cape Verde level, fans in the square were already celebrating.

It also meant that in the 97th minute, when Cape Verde had a goal disallowed for offside, those in the square had no idea. Thanks to the radios, the celebrations had begun before the shot was even taken. The news of the goal being ruled out on the radio was then drowned out by the cheers as the ball went in on the TV. It took a full 90 seconds for everyone to realise it had been disallowed, by which time the final whistle had been blown.

But in typical Cape Verdean fashion, while people were disappointed, they were able to see the bright side. As one man who watched the game said: "It wasn't an offside, but God wanted us to celebrate here."

Cape Verde legends ...Roberto Lopes and Garry Rodrigues celebrate after the win against Eswatini

Party in Praia... supporters celebrate Cape Verde's World Cup qualification

"We're going to win 3-0!"...a fan welcomes the players

Managerial mastermind... Cape Verde head coach Bubista

That sense of "no stress" continued throughout the week in the build-up to the match against Eswatini. Everyone from the old town through to the busy streets of Achada Santo Antonio were confident and excited. The players were the same.

On entering the team hotel a couple of days before kick-off, there was no security protecting players, no coaches insisting on them avoiding distractions. Instead, it had the energy of a holiday or family reunion: legendary goalkeeper Vozinha was hanging out with a young relative, giving him a ticket to the game; experienced forward Nuno Da Costa, who plays in Turkey with Istanbul Basaksehir, was sitting with his grandfather, catching up during one of the few moments they can see each other in the year.

"They just need people's energy around. They need to be occupied. They need to be relaxed," Irish-born centre-back Roberto Lopes tells *World Soccer*. "When you're home with the national team, you make the most of it. Everyone's family comes around, just to be with each other. It's a really nice feeling."

On the morning of the game, aside from the above average number of Cape Verdean shirts being worn, there was barely a hint of what was to come. *World Soccer* arrived at the Estadio Nacional de Cape Verde four hours ahead of kick-off to find more goats grazing outside the stadium than fans inside it.

As fans emerged from buses taking them from the centre of the city to the 15,000-seater stadium on the outskirts of town, it had a feeling more of a festival than of a crunch match. Spectators made an orderly queue stretching half a kilometre down the road as their tickets were checked. Music was blaring and everywhere was a sea of blue shirts and flags.

From Lisbon to Boston to Rotterdam to Oslo, Cape Verdeans were celebrating the greatest moment in the country's history

After a spine-tingling rendition of the national anthem, *Cântico da Liberdade* (Chant of Liberty), the match kicked off to a thunderous roar.

Over the next hour, that energy would gradually sap as a stubborn Eswatini side stood firm. The Blue Sharks were uncharacteristically sloppy – not aided by the hard plastic pitch or the gale of a wind constantly blowing off the Pico D'Antonia Mountain that the stadium sits beneath.

That was until the 48th minute, when Dailon Livramento bundled home a goal – and all hell broke loose. The goalscorer rushed over to the side of the pitch where his parents, brother and a dozen cousins were screaming for joy. The press box became a melee as fans who had joined because there were no seats elsewhere hugged foreign journalists who were themselves in tears.

Willy Semedo's goal a few minutes later brought similar celebrations but they were both dwarfed by the third goal, scored by Stopira, which sealed the win. The left-back, a local lad, is Praia's favourite son. Last year, he retired from international football only to return in September to help the team get qualification over the line. In his first appearance of the campaign, he came off the bench late on – as much as recognition for his service to the team as anything else – and wrote his name into Cape Verdean football history.

His goal set off wild celebrations across the ten islands of Cape Verde and throughout the world. From Lisbon to Boston to Rotterdam to Oslo, Cape Verdeans were celebrating the greatest moment in the country's history.

At full-time, there was not a dry eye in the stadium. From the fans to the foreign media to the delegation from FIFA, led by Cape Verdean-born former Switzerland international Gelson Fernandes, tears of joy flowed like wine.

Coach Bubista's press conference was interrupted by the players who, armed with cans of Sumol sodas, burst in and soaked their coach while chanting his name.

The players went straight from the stadium back into town to the old national stadium, Estadio da Varzea, in the heart of the city where tens of thousands of fans were waiting for them. Fifty years ago, it was in this very spot that the Cape Verdean flag was lifted for the first time as the country declared independence. Now, the people returned to celebrate its greatest moment since.

But instead of getting on stage and being presented to the crowd, they just joined the fans. As the party, led by local artists and DJs, kicked off, the players mingled with fans. In particular, Stopira, Ryan Mendes and Vozinha stopped at everyone to chat and take photos. Thanks to this victory, the latter will be celebrating his 40th birthday in North America at a World Cup.

Finally, when the fireworks were lit well past midnight, the players and their families made their way to the stage. There they sung with Soraia Ramos a rendition of her song, *Nha Terra* (My Land).

Face to face: Roberto Lopes

"We've made history for Cape Verde"

Born in Dublin to an Irish mother and Cape Verdean father, Shamrock Rovers defender Roberto Lopes first pulled on the Cape Verde shirt in 2019. Since then he's become a core member of the side and, after celebrating a historic first World Cup qualification, he spoke to *World Soccer* about the team's rise…

Congratulations – you are going to the World Cup with Cape Verde! How does it feel?
It's just incredible, difficult to put into words. We've worked so hard to get to this point, so to finally secure qualification is really special.

Every time we play in Cape Verde you can see how much football means to the people. They absolutely love it and we are happy to have created a moment of history for them.

You could have qualified in the penultimate game against Libya but drew 3-3. Then it was 0-0 at half-time in the final match against Eswatini. Were you nervous?
Honestly, the belief was always still there. I think our game plan was really good [against Eswatini] and we had to be patient. They were stubborn at times in the first half, but I thought we played well and we knew we'd get chances. Thankfully I stepped out of the way of a cross and Dailon [Livramento] finished it to put us ahead. He's been such a talisman for us – carrying the team on his back at times. His all-round work has been amazing and of course he scored the winning goal against Cameroon [in September].

How important was that 1-0 victory over Cameroon? Did that give you belief that it could be your time?
Absolutely. It was such an important result and it made a difference that the stadium was packed. It doesn't happen often because the matches are usually played in the afternoon and people can't get time off work. For the Cameroon game, the government gave everyone a half-day and it was the same against Eswatini. When that happens, everyone shows up and what is usually a 15-minute drive from the stadium to the hotel takes an hour because people are out in the streets celebrating.

The significance of beating Cameroon was obvious but my initial reaction was to keep ourselves grounded because we hadn't actually done anything yet. It was a great feeling and we celebrated that night with all the fans, but in my mind we needed to stay calm and make sure we did the job when October came around. Thankfully, we did that.

It must have been tough to focus on club football between those qualifiers?
Of course it's difficult because of the magnitude of the World Cup. Everybody wants to ask about what could happen and it's on everyone's mind. But throughout my career, especially at my club, I've always been good at addressing the challenge in front of me, getting through it, and moving on to the next one quickly. I had quite a busy schedule with Shamrock Rovers, which helped. We were going for the league, had just started our Conference League campaign and had a cup semi-final too.

Your dad flew over from Ireland for the final World Cup qualifier. What was it like having him there?
I'm lucky enough to still have my grandad down in Cape Verde and my dad still goes to visit him. It's difficult to travel between the islands, especially when we're down for football, because we're usually in the capital, Praia. But there are fan clubs locally for the Lopes family and when my dad goes there, he's well looked after. This time he was there for the games, meeting up with friends. It's obviously a very big deal, and it means a lot to connect with our family.

You've captained Cape Verde a couple of times – how does that feel?
You have to pinch yourself afterwards because it's very surreal. I only started playing international football at 28 and here we are six years later. It's flown by. I still feel relatively new, but I cherish every moment. It's always a source of pride for me and my family when I represent Cape Verde on these stages and I can still remember when I heard the fans chanting my name. It was the most Cape Verdean I'd ever felt and it was like I belonged. That moment was amazing. And of course to captain the national team, well, very few people in world football get to do that. It's really special and it'll stick with me forever.

You've been part of the national team setup since 2019. How has it evolved in that time?
When I came in, they were trying to introduce new players into the squad. It was a transitional

World Cup hero...Lopes celebrates after the win over Eswatini

period but we still had some really good experienced players like Vozinha, Ryan Mendes and Stopira, who were cornerstones of Cape Verdean football. They're still here today, which has been important because when you bring in new talent, you need people to give guidance – those who've been there and done it.

Cape Verde has come to lean heavily on its diaspora, with players from France, Portugal, the Netherlands and yourself from Ireland. What is the reality of those different backgrounds coming together?
I remember I was told to sing a song as part of my initiation when I first arrived – and I wasn't allowed to do it in English, it had to be in Creole. I thought that was brilliant. As nervous as I was, it was important for me to show I wanted to embrace everything. When I was on the pitch, I made a point of not speaking English – only Creole, even if it was just a few words. For me it was about showing that I was all in. Any player who's come in and lasted with Cape Verde has done that – it's not just about playing, it's everything else around it.

Since I started, the togetherness has grown and grown but even back then there was a belief within the squad that we had good players and could create something. Our aim was to qualify for AFCON 2021 in Cameroon and for the 2022 World Cup. We fell short of the World Cup because we were in a tough group with Nigeria but at AFCON we gave a really good account of ourselves – we were knocked out by Senegal, who went on to win it. It gave us a strong belief that we could mix it with the top sides in Africa.

That must have been cemented when you reached the Africa Cup of Nations quarter-finals in 2024 in Ivory Coast?
The belief has just been growing with us all the time. Once you get a taste for it, you just want more. The AFCON in 2024 was unbelievable and again we had some eye-catching performances. We went a stage further, which showed improvement, but we still wanted to get even better. On the back of that, we really focused on this World Cup and asked: "Can we get there?" We've had a quiet confidence. We respect every opponent, whether it's a team people expect us to beat or one expected to beat us. We treat them all the same. It's progress, and it's where we want to be as a nation. We want to be at the big tournaments.

What have been the standout moments in your international career so far?
Over the years, the games against Nigeria stand out. The 2022 World Cup qualifier we played in Cape Verde was brilliant. We lost 2-1 but felt like we gave them the goals. They had all the big hitters out – Alex Iwobi, Victor Osimhen – really top talent. I've played against Sadio Mane for Senegal, Mo Salah for Egypt and Riyad Mahrez for Algeria too. I've been lucky to face some of Africa's best.

With the World Cup coming up next year, who are some of the Cape Verdean players who could make an impact at the tournament?
Definitely [Villarreal defender] Logan Costa. He's amazing. I'm not just saying that because he's a centre-half as well, but ever since he came in, he's looked a million dollars. Everything he does looks easy. He's unlucky to have suffered an ACL injury, but he's been there supporting us and hopefully we can have Logan back for the World Cup.

We've also got a really exciting winger, Helio Varela, who moved to Maccabi Tel Aviv recently. He's sharp, rapid, a traditional Cape Verdean winger.

Steven Moreira is playing in MLS with Columbus Crew. He's a more experienced defender but only joined us in the last year or two and he's a fantastic player – I wish we'd had him sooner.

We have great players throughout the team – and it's great that the world will be able to see that now.

Interview by Mark Lomas

Diaspora...Cape Verde's Swiss-born defender Dylan Tavares (#16) at the last AFCON

Years in the making

How Cape Verde utilised its diaspora to become the second-smallest country to qualify for the World Cup

Words: Mark Gleeson

Cape Verde's historic success in reaching the World Cup is a direct result of the diaspora, dipping into the country's large emigrant community.

The impact of using players born or raised in Europe, especially those who were capped by European countries at junior level, has been a boon for African nations. FIFA's change of the rules regarding footballing nationality back in 2003 was a watershed, and it was around that time that Cape Verde's fortunes began to change.

The island nation won its independence from Portugal in 1975, but unlike other new African countries, it took a while to organise its football association and national team. Cape Verde only joined FIFA in 1986, and made their debut in international competition at the Amilcar Cabral Cup, a regional tournament for West African nations. In the early years the team was exclusively home-based and up until 1992 the regional finals was the only international exposure that they got.

A first qualifier for the 1994 Africa Cup of Nations was a two-legged preliminary round knockout game against Lusophone rivals Guinea-Bissau in 1992, which they lost 4-1 on aggregate. Former Portugal international Alberto Fonseca, born in Bissau and who played at Benfica, was the coach.

Cape Verde did not bother to enter again until the 2000 Cup of Nations qualifiers, and their first World Cup participation was for the 2002 finals. By then they were able to call upon a handful of players from Portuguese clubs, but were still briskly eliminated by Algeria over two legs in the preliminary rounds.

Defender Rui Monteiro, from Sparta Rotterdam in the Netherlands, was the first player they plucked from elsewhere

in the diaspora to strengthen the team. Some 35,000 Cape Verdeans in the Netherlands have formed a close-knit community since the 1960s and live primarily in the Delfshaven neighbourhood of Rotterdam. They are descendants of the Cape Verdeans who migrated to work in the docks.

"We all know each other," says former international Jeffry Fortes. "A lot of the guys are related. [Current players] Garry Rodrigues and Jamiro Monteiro are distant cousins of mine. The connection is formed very quickly. Even if you're not related, you're often friends. Our community is very close-knit."

Another Dutch-born player, Dailon Livramento, 24, scored several crucial goals in the 2026 World Cup qualifying campaign, and 31-year-old Monteiro is the midfield heartbeat. Rodrigues is a speedy winger, now 34, who came through the Feyenoord youth academy but has had a nomadic career, including stints at Galatasaray and Olympiacos.

Apart from a two-year break between 2015 and 2017, Cape Verde's football has been run since 1999 by Mario Semedo. One of world football's longest-serving football association presidents, he is credited with driving much of the progress and ensuring stability that has allowed development ideas to stick and progress. He formalised a talent identification programme that has found many other players with Cape Verdean heritage elsewhere in Europe.

"The solid FA talent identification strategies and global recruitment network, along with the construction of many new artificial fields throughout the islands, as well as the introduction of many coaching, training and grassroots development programmes, have helped catapult Cape Verdean football to new international heights," says player agent Tony Araujo.

But there was not always an immediate uptake, and the process was somewhat laboured without resources.

"We often encountered players with dual nationality who played in Portugal, the Netherlands or France and who, because of their age at the time, wanted to wait for an opportunity with the national teams of their countries of residence," adds Rui Aguas. The former Portugal striker, who played for both Benfica and Porto, was coach of Cape Verde for two separate spells and took them to the 2015 Cup of Nations finals. "No-one flew out to talk to them. As far as I can remember, that never happened. We made every possible contact by phone or on social media, and we received information from emigrants."

Midfield heartbeat ...Jamiro Monteiro was born in the Netherlands

> "It was a goal that the Cape Verdean federation long pursued, and it didn't just happen spontaneously. It was the result of years of work"
>
> **Former Cape Verde head coach Joao de Deus on the nation qualifying for AFCON in 2013**

But by working hard at increasing the player pool, success slowly started to come their way. They came second to Cameroon in their 2010 World Cup qualifying group under the management of Joao de Deus, who successfully integrated many more players during his time in charge.

Building on those foundations, De Seus' successor Lucio Antunes led the team to the 2013 Cup of Nations finals – Cape Verde's first appearance in a major tournament.

"That qualification was a good example of work in football that is methodically and sustainably carried out and ultimately bears fruit," says De Deus. "It was a goal that the Cape Verdean federation long pursued, and it didn't just happen spontaneously. It was the result of years of work, experience, and development that the country underwent in football."

Over a decade on, Cape Verde are now headed to the biggest stage of them all. "We are now a country that the whole world knows," coach Bubista proclaimed after they secured their berth.

Flying the flag ...former Cape Verde head coach Lucio Antunes at the 2013 Africa Cup of Nations

Enkla Elbolaget
Sölvesborg
MAXI
MELLBY GÅRD
Sparbank
SÄLJFAST

eye witness

Anthony Tomas reports

SWEDEN

A Swedish fairy tale

How a village team became champions of Sweden

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5

Midday church bells stir the small town of Bromolla in southern Sweden into life on an otherwise sleepy October Sunday. It signals the moment when, as if from nowhere, football supporters bedecked in yellow and black emerge from every street, converging on the same hotel like bees returning to the hive. Inside its packed bars the buzz is electric. Yet not only is it still two hours before kick-off, these fans' team is not even playing.

These fans support Mjallby AIF, and they have turned out in force to watch their wildest dreams become reality. Formed in 1939, Mjallby have spent the majority of their existence bouncing between Sweden's lower leagues, never lifting major silverware. Yet today, if IFK Goteborg can avoid defeat to second-placed Hammarby, Mjallby will win Sweden's top flight – the Allsvenskan – for the first time, completing one of football's great miracles.

"Miracle" is no exaggeration – as recently as 2016, Mjallby needed a win on the final day to avoid relegation to the fourth tier with the threat of bankruptcy looming. Debts were paid and promotions earned and, in 2020, the club returned to the top flight and finished fifth, their best-ever league position. The next three seasons saw mid-table consistency, before finishing fifth again in 2024, breaking the 50-point mark in the Allsvenskan.

That was supposed to be Mjallby's ceiling, until 2025. Anders Torstensson's side first went top of the table in early May and have been there permanently since mid-July. Their expected drop off never came, and instead they have been the model of consistency, losing just once all season, having scored in every match.

Swedish rules requiring clubs to be 51% owned by supporters means their remarkable ascendancy has not been bankrolled by outside investment. Indeed, Mjallby's budget – equivalent to some teams in England's League Two – is dwarfed by the likes of Malmo and the big Stockholm and Gothenburg clubs, who have historically dominated the league.

"I heard many say this is a fairy tale like Leicester, but I think this is bigger," says Roger, who has been supporting the club since 1990. "You've got so many clubs in Sweden that have 30 or 40 times the amount of money [that Mjallby has]. It shouldn't be possible."

If it's not down to money, then how has it been possible? The answer may lie in the local area itself.

The town of Mjallby lies in the heart of Listerlandet peninsula, but the home ground, Strandvallen, is 5.5 kilometres away in the tiny coastal village of Hallevik, with a population of between 800 and 1,500 people depending on which source you believe. Either way, they could all fit inside the club's 7,500 capacity stadium with plenty of room to spare. Bromolla, almost 20km from the ground, is not even in the same county, yet here and in every village in between, the abundance of yellow and black flags flying proves that this is still Mjallby territory.

A campsite next door to Strandvallen brings Hallevik some summer investment, but this is primarily a fishing village, while farming dominates the inland areas. The result is a

hard-working, self-sufficient and close-knit community that is always ready to help each other, and that mentality has filtered through to its football club, which has very few permanent staff members.

"It's unique for this kind of club, it's full of people who do not get paid to work here," says Martin who has spent over 40 years on the Strandvallen terraces. "It makes the club tighter," adds Patrik, who stands next to him.

"It's always been about fighting for each other," Roger explains, "It's like a family. I don't think any other club has that feeling." He is wearing one of his most prized possessions, a club shirt from the 1980s gifted to him by Hasse Larsson, a legendary player, manager and now director of football, whose house Roger once worked at.

Timmy, 21, is one of the younger fans watching on, but the sense of what matters here has not been lost on his generation. "No one here has grown up in a big city with a lot of money," he says. "There is a lot of struggle and a lot of family relationships, everyone knows each other and everyone is so social."

The social side extends to the players. It is common knowledge that squad members share flats or live in the same buildings within the local area, providing a strong bond that means a lot in these parts, and is reflected on the pitch.

But if their togetherness has made them competitive, then a leap of faith and a sprinkling of ingenuity has taken them to the top. Before the start of last season, Torstensson brought in Karl Marius Aksum as his assistant. A man with no previous senior coaching experience, Aksum holds a PhD in Visual Perception in Elite Football. The key to his philosophy is "scanning" – ensuring players make head movements before receiving the ball to increase their awareness of their surroundings and make better decisions. In two seasons, Mjallby have gone from being a defensive side to one that can dominate possession and be clinical in attack; more importantly, it is one that is on the brink of history.

Vital goal...captain Tom Pettersson celebrates scoring against Elfsborg

> "Eight years ago, we were about to go down to the fourth division, and now we're here!"
>
> Mjallby fan Roger

SATURDAY, OCTOBER 4

Twenty-four hours earlier, Mjallby are preparing for the latest test of their philosophy as they welcome Elfsborg to Strandvallen. In the morning, the silence in Hallevik is broken by ferocious winds coming off the sea as Storm Amy reaches Sweden. The rain is so heavy that the referee undertakes a pitch inspection, but the tireless work of volunteers in the preceding 48 hours has prevented a postponement.

Slowly but surely, the hardy Mjallby fans brave the conditions to fill their spiritual home. Dreadful form has seen Elfsborg, title contenders themselves early on, plummet into mid-table in recent weeks, making Mjallby heavy

Title party...Jesper Gustavsson leads the Mjallby celebrations

favourites for another three points. With no change in conditions, the weather is arguably their toughest opponent.

The home side adapt better to the soggy surface, and after several close calls, the breakthrough comes five minutes before half-time. Timo Stavitski's shot is parried and the rebound is tapped in by Jacob Bergstrom.

It's a special moment for the striker. Born in the region, he is currently in his third spell at Mjallby and few understand the club's significance better than him. First signed when the club were in the third tier, he is a fans' favourite for his television interviews, often with language as agricultural as the region itself. If Mjallby are doing a Leicester, then Bergstrom is their Jamie Vardy.

Just before the hour-mark, Mjallby double their lead when captain Tom Pettersson meets a corner with the purest of volleys. The 35-year-old then backs up his goal by marshalling the defence through the rest of the game, as Elfsborg find no way through. Mjallby cruise to a 2-0 win.

At full-time, club stalwart Jesper Gustavsson grabs a megaphone and leads the ultras in song, as his team-mates mingle with supporters. Soaked through they may be, these players will always have time for the fans.

The victory means Hammarby have to win to keep the title race alive. With their patchy away form and Goteborg chasing European qualification, there is real belief among the Mjallby fans that the home side can do them a favour and hand them the trophy.

Did fans like Roger ever think this day would come? "Of course you hope, you dream, it would be fantastic. But realistically? No!"

SUNDAY, OCTOBER 5

Just three minutes into Goteburg v Hammarby, Paulos Abraham gives the visitors the lead and the atmosphere in Bromolla sinks like a stone. The Gothenburg side show little of their recent form, and in the second half Abraham gets on the end of a cross to make it 2-0. With nine minutes to play, Max Fenger pulls one back, but despite late pressure Hammarby hold on for a 2-1 win – there's no title for Mjallby just yet, and the celebrations are paused.

MONDAY, OCTOBER 20

Two weeks later, after the October international break, Hammarby have won 2-1 again, this time against local rivals AIK. But it changes little, as a victory tonight for Mjallby will take them 11 points clear with three games to play. Having been desperate for a Goteborg win a fortnight earlier, it just so happens to be the same side standing in their way this time.

Around 2,000 fans are in the away end at Gamla Ullevi, and yet, as has been the case all season, Mjallby do not let the occasion get to them, putting in another confident performance. With 20 minutes gone, sustained pressure results in Bergstrom hooking in the opening goal, before Pettersson scrambles in a second soon after. In a match remarkably similar to the Elfsborg win, the same two players are the goalscoring heroes, as Mjallby use their defensive structure to hold out for another 2-0 victory. The fairy tale has a happy ending.

Amid the wild celebrations, manager Torstensson takes it all in. His first major honour comes 14 months after being diagnosed with chronic lymphatic leukaemia. His illness has allowed him "not to take anything for granted and not to put things off until tomorrow," an approach he cites as crucial to Mjallby's success.

The title means a maiden European adventure in the Champions League qualifiers next summer. Strandvallen not meeting UEFA requirements means home matches will likely be played in Malmo or further afield, but fans like Roger are confident the club will not lose its identity.

"Eight years ago, we were about to go down to the fourth division, and now we're here," he says. "Even then it was like a family, so I think even when it's time for Europe, it's just the next step. Even if we have to play in Malmo, there will be lots of Mjallby supporters. We'll follow them everywhere."

Whatever the next step holds for this club, its local community will be there for it all. You cannot choose your family, but Allsvenskan champions Mjallby struck incredibly lucky with theirs.

Party time...Mjallby supporters celebrate on the terraces

KEY MEN

Anders TORSTENSSON

Manager and Mr Mjallby himself. When he has not been working for the club as a player, manager, assistant or caretaker over the past 40 years, he has worked as a school principal. His experience paired with assistant Karl Marius Aksum's innovativeness proved a perfect blend.

Tom PETTERSSON

As the season wore on, and opponents dropped deeper, Mjallby increasingly found goals from set-pieces, where the centre-back was a real threat. He scored key goals in their title-defining games, on top of marshalling the league's meanest defence.

Noel TORNQVIST

It's easy to see why the giant goalkeeper, signed by Serie A side Como in the summer and loaned back until January, has so many admirers. As well as filling the Swedish champions' goal with his huge frame, Tornqvist is a gifted distributor.

Elliot STROUD

A wing-back with English roots, Stroud's boundless energy on the left flank was key to Mjallby's 3-4-2-1 formation. The 23-year-old also chipped in with more than his fair share of goals.

eyewitness

Mike Tuckerman reports

AUSTRALIA

Old soccer, new football

The newly formed Australian Championship marks a new chapter in the country's footballing history

Four drinks breaks. That's how many times referee Zac Keenan stops play on a swelteringly hot Brisbane afternoon to allow players from Moreton City Excelsior and Sydney Olympic to rehydrate.

Welcome to Australian football, where games are played in summer and temperatures often skirt the bounds of player safety.

A midday kick-off for Moreton City's first-ever home game in the Australian Championship sees the two teams run out under a blazing hot sun and a temperature of 31.2°C – with relative humidity at 70% – although anyone in attendance at Perry Park will tell you it feels much hotter than that.

Not that the scorching conditions are going to ruin Moreton City's big day. Having only been formed in 2023 through the merger of Moreton Bay United and the much older Albany Creek Excelsior, the club from Brisbane's northern fringes have made quick headway.

Last year, they made it all the way to the quarter-finals of the Australia Cup, the national domestic cup competition. After battling their way through the regional rounds, they dispatched South Australian powerhouse Campbelltown City 5-1 in the last 32, and then sensationally dumped out A-League outfit Perth Glory with a 3-2 win in the following round.

Eventual finalists Melbourne Victory halted their progress in the last eight, but not before Moreton City Excelsior had firmly announced themselves to a national audience.

It was no surprise, then, to see the newcomers finish top of the 2025 NPL Queensland standings in just their second season. What is perhaps more surprising is to find Moreton City Excelsior listed among some of Australia's most famous clubs as part of a new national competition.

THE AUSTRALIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

After years of delays, the inaugural edition of the Australian Championship kicked off in October.

Originally intended to be a genuine second division below the A-League, the new competition pits eight semi-professional "foundation" clubs against the eight sides that finished top of Australia's state-based National Premier Leagues (NPL). Rather than a typical home-and-away league competition, it follows a "Champions League" format with a group stage and knockout round.

The four groups of four allow clubs to cut down on travel costs, before the top two from each progress to the single-leg quarter-finals. The semi-finals and grand final – set to take place on Saturday, December 6 – will be played in neutral venues.

The eight qualifying sides lend the competition a national footprint after the eight foundation members were handpicked from Australia's two strongest state leagues.

But there is more to this than simply adding fixtures to the semi-professional circuit. Essentially, the Australian Championship is an attempt to bridge the long-standing divide that has existed ever since the A-League was founded in 2005.

The opener, on October 10, was a clash between South ▸

Australian Championship... players scrap for the ball in the clash between Moreton City Excelsior and Sydney Olympic

Ruthless, relentless, resilient...a flag inside the Moreton dressing room

Australian Championship...the new competition got underway in October

Melbourne and Sydney Olympic. A crowd of 6,825 supporters filed into Lakeside Stadium for the latest instalment of "the Greek derby" – some 21 years after it was last played in the National Soccer League (NSL).

The two clubs, founded by Greek migrants in the late 1950s, were at one time two of the biggest names in Australian club football. But they were sidelined – at least, according to some – with the advent of the A-League. Since then, a noticeable schism has opened up between the clubs that comprised the semi-professional NSL – which existed from 1977 until 2004 – and the fully professional national top flight that replaced it.

Forced to compete in the country's various state leagues, many of the old NSL clubs have lost a generation of supporters from the ethnic diasporas they were originally formed to represent.

The journey "away from old soccer and into new football," as former Football Australia chief Frank Lowy once described it, was supposed to herald a new era of professionalism in the Australian game. But for many fans of ex-NSL clubs, the foundation of the A-League remains a sore point.

"These historic clubs that kept football alive in this country were basically shoved aside when the A-League started," former Socceroos midfielder Peter Katholos tells *World Soccer*. "You can't tell a supporter of a particular club to go and follow another entity."

Greek-born Katholos, who played 170 games for Sydney Olympic across three separate spells, believes the creation of the Australian Championship will help bridge the "old soccer, new football" divide and could one day allow Australia's fragmented football pyramid to finally be connected.

Photos credit: all images by Josh Springfield

MORETON CITY EXCELSIOR

One of the eight qualifiers in this year's competition, Moreton City Excelsior claimed Queensland's solitary qualifying spot as league winners despite losing the grand final to traditional heavyweights Lions FC. Having secured their place, they quickly made it clear they weren't there to simply make up the numbers in a competition that takes place after the state league season.

They kicked off with a thrilling 3-2 victory away at Broadmeadow Magic, with playmaker Seita Murai – one of three Japanese imports in their squad – scoring the winner from the penalty spot eight minutes into second-half

Perry Park ...Moreton City Excelsior's temporary home

AUSTRALIA'S FRAGMENTED FOOTBALL PYRAMID

The A-League is the top tier of Australian football, above the second-tier National Premier Leagues (NPL). In total, there are eight separate regional NPLs, each with various numbers of teams, from which the Australian Championship teams are drawn. A promotion/relegation system is in place across most, but not up to the independent A-League – a situation that is unlikely to change until the A-League's current licensing deal expires in 2034.

stoppage time. They weren't exactly overawed in a 2-0 defeat away at foundation club South Melbourne either, before welcoming Sydney Olympic for their first "home" game in the competition.

With the club's compact Wolter Park home in Albany Creek boasting little in the way of broadcast facilities, they have been forced to host their Australian Championship fixtures 15 kilometres further south at Perry Park – once the home of former NSL side Brisbane Strikers.

And those broadcast facilities are needed, with all 55 games of the two-month competition set to screen on the Special Broadcasting Service (SBS) – a public service network described as "the spiritual home of football in Australia". As well as screening every World Cup finals since Mexico '86, the network was also the long-standing broadcaster of the NSL.

The move to bring domestic football back to SBS screens has been widely lauded, not least because it allows a new generation of matchday commentators and content creators to showcase their talents. Many of those who work in football in Australia do so semi-professionally, often working full-time jobs during the day before fulfilling their football duties after hours – and not just within the media.

Cameron Millar has long combined his role as a teacher with his duties as Moreton City Excelsior's head coach. However, this season the club offered him a full-time role that combines his head coaching duties with a position overseeing the academy, finally allowing the 31-year-old to fully concentrate on football. With Moreton City Excelsior flying the flag for the entire state of Queensland, it's a responsibility he is taking very seriously.

"We want to try to win the competition," Millar tells *World Soccer*. "We're approaching it with as much professionalism as we can."

Having already lost to one former NSL heavyweight, the visit of Sydney Olympic offers the Queensland underdogs the chance to test themselves against a side that finished a disappointing seventh in the tough New South Wales state league.

Pre-match...Moreton's players ahead of the Sydney Olympic clash

The Australian Championship is an attempt to bridge the long-standing divide that has existed ever since the A-League was founded in 2005

Moreton City Excelsior coach...Cameron Millar

Sadly for Millar, the gulf in class between the two competitions quickly becomes apparent. In just the eighth minute, Ali Auglah dinks a delicate finish over Excelsior goalkeeper Nathan Foster to round off a quick-fire counter-attack for Olympic.

The hosts fight back, with striker Andy Pengelly and another Japanese forward, Kenshin Takagishi, testing the Olympic goalkeeper, but two first-half drinks breaks kill much of the momentum.

An even bigger blow for the hosts comes with the loss of Takagishi, who limps from the field with an ankle injury shortly after the restart.

Then, midway through the second half, luck is against them yet again.

> "These historic clubs that kept football alive in this country were basically shoved aside when the A-League started"
>
> Former Australia midfielder Peter Katholos

Olympic skipper and former Hamilton Academical defender Ziggy Gordon appears to handle the ball inside the penalty area, but referee Keenan waves away Excelsior's fervent appeals for a spot-kick. Soon after, Olympic substitute Michael Vakis dances through a tired-looking defence before lifting a cool finish over the diving Foster. Donning a *Lucha Libre* mask in celebration earns him a yellow card and a chorus of jeers from those in the Bill Waddell Stand.

Duel...Sydney Olympic's Chris Donnell outjumps Lachlan Sayers

Looking to the future...Moreton City Excelsior's players form a huddle at the end of the game as head coach Cameron Millar addresses them

The home fans soon have something to cheer though, when substitute Luka Jankovic nods home with three minutes remaining to set up a grandstand finish. But in the end, it's too little, too late for the home team.

A STEP FORWARD

While a 2-1 defeat in front of an official attendance of 1,048 may not feel like much of a step forward for Australian football – as is typical, the game kicked off at the same time as the A-League meeting between Brisbane Roar and Wellington Phoenix just down the road – at least it's a start.

"They had two big moments, took both their chances, defended well at times and that's football," Moreton City Excelsior defender Harry Arnison tells *World Soccer* after the game. "I don't think we needed four drinks breaks," he adds. "We wanted to keep the game going."

For Olympic, the victory rekindled their Australian Championship hopes after starting the campaign with back-to-back 3-2 defeats to South Melbourne and Broadmeadow Magic.

"I lost my voice, I lost my legs, I lost my lungs but no one lost their heart today," says a visibly fatigued Gordon after his team's gruelling victory.

The teams met again in Sydney in early November, with both eyeing a spot in the latter stages. But whoever comes out on top, both in that game and the tournament overall, the ambitions for the competition's organisers are much higher. They are hoping that the Australian Championship can help heal some old wounds and maybe even one day connect the tiers of Australian football.

2025 AUSTRALIAN CHAMPIONSHIP

FOUNDATION CLUBS *(City)*

- Avondale FC *(Melbourne)*
- Marconi Stallions *(Sydney)*
- Preston Lions *(Melbourne)*
- South Melbourne *(Melbourne)*
- Sydney Olympic *(Sydney)*
- Sydney United 58 *(Sydney)*
- Wests APIA *(Sydney)*
- Wollongong Wolves *(Wollongong)*

QUALIFYING CLUBS *(City)*

- Bayswater City *(Perth)*
- Broadmeadow Magic *(Newcastle)*
- Canberra Croatia *(Canberra)*
- Heidelberg United *(Melbourne)*
- Moreton City Excelsior *(Brisbane)*
- North Eastern MetroStars *(Adelaide)*
- NWS Spirit *(Sydney)*
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eyewitness

Joel Richards reports

ARGENTINA

Argentina loses a legend

Argentine football is in mourning for the late Miguel Angel Russo

As a player, he was a one-club man. As a coach, with more than 1,000 games at 16 clubs in eight countries spanning over three decades, he was respected and admired. Winning the 2007 Copa Libertadores with Boca Juniors placed him in the pantheon of Argentine and South American football greats. In October, Miguel Angel Russo died of prostate cancer at the age of 69.

Emotive tributes poured in and a minute's silence was observed at grounds across the country after news broke of his passing. The day after the funeral, his son Ignacio, a young striker at Tigre, finished off a counter-attack to score in the league match against Newell's Old Boys. Ignacio lifted his shirt to point to a tattoo, which read: "*todo se cura con amor*" – "love heals everything".

Boca Juniors legend... tributes are paid to Miguel Angel Russo at the Bombonera

It is a quote from his father when he first started treatment for his illness.

"I took the decision to play because he would have wanted me to," said the 24-year-old forward, moved by the reaction from his fellow professionals and from supporters. "I didn't realise what my father meant to people."

Russo was perhaps not viewed as a master tactician or someone who brought radical innovation to the game. His trademark response to journalists was: "They're decisions," usually followed by a shrug. He made teams, he knew how to handle players, and he knew how to manage pressure. He left a unique imprint wherever he went.

LEFT: All smiles... Russo during last summer's Club World Cup

RUSSO THE PLAYER

Over the course of 14 seasons, Russo played more than 400 games for Estudiantes de la Plata. He won the 1982 Metropolitano title and the 1983 Nacional as captain alongside the likes of Alejandro Sabella, who would go on to coach Argentina to the 2014 World Cup final in Brazil.

Both Sabella and Russo were guided and moulded by Carlos Bilardo. "At Estudiantes I learnt that when you fall down, you get back up. If you fall 100 times, you get up 101 times," he would say.

Bilardo promoted a teenage Russo from the youth system and developed him into a midfielder who was at the heart of the two league title victories. A close relationship developed between the two. Russo often recalled Bilardo taking him to go to watch a game, promising they were going to see a player "who was going to be something else." The game was Argentinos Juniors at home to Talleres. The debutant was one Diego Armando Maradona.

While Maradona in his prime led Bilardo's Argentina to 1986 World Cup victory in Mexico, it was without Russo. The Estudiantes midfielder had featured regularly enough for the national team during World Cup qualifiers that he was included in the Panini sticker album. But an accident at home left him requiring an operation, leaving his fitness for the tournament in doubt. Bilardo personally told the midfielder he would not be going to Mexico. "The day you are a coach you will understand," Bilardo told him. "He was right," admitted Russo years later.

> Russo's trademark response to journalists was: "They're decisions," usually followed by a shrug

RUSSO THE COACH

Russo's first appointment as coach was at Lanus in 1989. Today, *El Granate* is a respected institution with an impressive youth system – the club won the 2013 Copa Sudamericana and reached the final of the 2017 Copa Libertadores, having won domestic titles in 2007 and 2016 – but back then the club had more modest aspirations.

Russo led Lanus to promotion to the first division in 1990 after a 14-year absence. The team was relegated immediately, but he brought them back up again as second division champions in 1992, with one of Bilardo's World Cup-winning midfielders Hector Enrique as the key player. The club have not been relegated since. Enrique led the tribute that Lanus held for Russo after the coach's death.

First major league title...Russo celebrates winning the 2005 Clausura with Velez Sarsfield

"He had an indelible influence on our sporting growth," wrote the club statement. So too Lanus had a similar influence on the young coach. "My development started here," Russo once said.

From Lanus, Russo's coaching career continued back home, in the city of La Plata with Estudiantes. *La Pincha* were struggling in the second division and he was tasked with returning the club to the top flight. Taking a leaf from Bilardo's book of man-management, Russo informed one of the club's promising teenage midfielders that if he chose to buy a car instead of making a safer investment for his future, such as buying a property, he would be dropped from the team. Juan Sebastian Veron took his coach's advice, and kept his place in the starting XI under Russo. "He was a legend at our institution," Veron recently said. After an illustrious career in the European game and with the national team, "*La Brujita*" is now president of Estudiantes. "Miguel was part of the rebuilding of Estudiantes as a club," said Veron. "He had conviction in what he felt and what he wanted."

After a brief spell at Universidad de Chile in 1996, reaching the semi-finals of the Libertadores, losing to eventual champions River Plate, Russo returned to Argentina with Rosario Central. It would be the first of five spells at the club.

Between his debut with Central in the mid-1990s and his last game in 2024, Russo managed a series of pressure-pot situations and emotions in Rosario. He once saved the *Canalla* from relegation, once earned the club promotion when they had been relegated, and then in 2023 won the club's first title in 36 years. That trophy placed Russo as only the third coach in Argentine football to have won league titles with three different clubs, along with Americo Gallego and Jose Yudica. The late legendary cartoonist and famed Central supporter Roberto Fontanarrosa once wrote that Central "does not have history, it has mythology." Alongside the likes of such greats as Cesar Luis Menotti, Mario Kempes and Angel Di Maria, Russo has a place alongside Rosario Central's legends.

Russo's first major title was with Velez Sarsfield in 2005. With a squad almost exclusively formed of players from the youth system, *El Fortin* defeated all of the traditional "Big Five" (River Plate, Boca Juniors, Independiente, Racing and San Lorenzo) on the way to winning their first title in seven years.

ABOVE: Rosario legend...Russo led Rosario Central in five separate spells

LEFT: Russo the player...the former midfielder won 17 caps for Argentina

ABOVE: Double act... Riquelme and Russo masterminded Boca's 2007 Libertadores triumph

BOCA AND THE LIBERTADORES

That success with Velez was the launch pad for Russo to join Boca Juniors in December 2006, and experience the pressure that comes with coaching one of South America's biggest clubs. This was a Boca side still featuring many players from the Carlos Bianchi era, which included multiple Libertadores and Intercontinental titles. "The Copa is that old flame you want to win back," said Russo when he arrived at the Bombonera, where the priority is always the Libertadores.

Russo was handed a trump card in February 2007. Juan Roman Riquelme joined on loan for six months from Villarreal after his relationship with Manuel Pellegrini had broken down. This was peak Riquelme, a playmaker who had steered the Yellow Submarine to the Champions League semi-finals just months earlier, only to dramatically miss a late penalty against Arsenal.

A midfield three of Pablo Ledesma, a young Ever Banega and Neri Cardozo were then tasked with delivering the ball to Riquelme. Together with an ultra-combative and experienced back-line, Boca were untouchable.

The *Xeneize* defeated Velez, Libertad of Paraguay and Cucuta Deportivo of Colombia before meeting Brazilians Gremio in the final.

With two stellar performances from Riquelme, Man of the Match in both the home and away ties in the old two-legged format, Boca swept past Gremio 5-0 on aggregate. Riquelme finished the tournament with eight goals and six assists in ten games.

> "When I joined in 2007 and now in 2020, nobody said: 'Good luck, Miguel.' They said: 'You have to win the Copa Libertadores.' That is Boca"
>
> **Russo on the high expectations at Boca Juniors**

"With Martin Palermo, Rodrigo Palacio and Riquelme, you have to be ambitious," said Russo.

Boca had the firepower and creativity, but struggled in the group stage of the Libertadores. Russo left Riquelme out of away games while the No.10 recovered fitness, up until the knockout phase.

It was Boca's sixth Copa Libertadores crown, and the pinnacle of Russo's career.

Boca had to wait until the following January to re-sign Riquelme permanently, by which point they had already lost to Carlo Ancelotti's Milan 4-2 in the Club World Cup final. With no playmaker of their own to cancel out a world-class Kaka, they were unable to reproduce the 2000 and 2003 victories in the Intercontinental Cup over Real Madrid and Milan. Russo departed two weeks after the final.

A series of short spells at clubs in Argentina (San Lorenzo, Rosario Central, Racing, Estudiantes and Velez Sarsfield) followed before Russo left for Colombia. With Millonarios, he ended a run of five years without silverware, winning two trophies. It was here where his prostate cancer first appeared. He coached the team throughout his treatment –

Back at Boca... Russo was hired by his former player Juan Roman Riquelme in June

a sign of what would happen years later. Having recovered, in a press conference he thanked the medical staff who had helped him by using the phrase that his son Ignacio now has tattooed. Love heals everything.

Further spells in Peru (Alianza Lima) and Paraguay (Cerro Porteno) followed, but the remainder of his career – and life – would be defined by Boca.

Russo returned to the Bombonera in 2020, with Riquelme by now vice-president and sporting director at the club. He found a side that was still reeling from defeat to arch-rivals River Plate in the 2018 Copa Libertadores final. "When I joined in 2007 and now in 2020," said Russo at the time, "nobody said: 'Good luck, Miguel.' They said: 'You have to win the Copa Libertadores.' That is Boca."

South American champion...Russo holds the 2007 Copa Libertadores trophy

With Carlos Tevez leading the line, Boca won two trophies, importantly pipping River to the league title. But Russo's side lost to Santos in the Copa Libertadores semi-finals and, after a run of ten games without a victory, Russo's second spell ended.

More short spells at other clubs followed, including six months in Saudi Arabia with Al Nassr. But in 2025 Boca once again had entered crisis mode after crashing out of the Libertadores in the qualifying stage. The figure of Miguel Angel Russo acquired greater dimension every year that Boca missed out on another Copa.

Russo left San Lorenzo to return to Boca. Yet on the touchline at the Club World Cup his fragility and ill-health was evident. In Argentina, TV cameras no longer focused on Russo out of respect for the delicate situation. He began missing training sessions and matches as he received treatment in hospital.

What transpired in the days after his passing was a conversation between Russo and Riquelme, who over the years had forged a father-son relationship. "Things aren't looking good," Russo said, "but if something is going to happen to me I want it to be while I'm coaching Boca."

Riquelme, and Boca, had agreed to help Russo through his final days in the manner he most wanted: coaching Boca Juniors.

His assistant, Claudio Ubeda, has since taken the reins and will remain in charge until at least the end of the season.

The ashes of Miguel Angel Russo were scattered at the stadiums of Boca Juniors, Lanus, Rosario Central and Estudiantes de la Plata, in line with his wishes.

Libertadores legend...a Boca shirt pays tribute to Russo's finest hour

DOMINIK SZOBOSZLAI

"I want everyone to know who I am and remember my name 100 years from now"

In the summer of 2023, Liverpool paid RB Leipzig £60 million to sign Dominik Szoboszlai. Since then, the Hungary talisman has won a Premier League title, been used in a variety of positions by two different managers, captained his country at a European Championship, and become a father. In October, the 25-year-old sat down with *World Soccer* to discuss all of that and more

You recently became a father. How has this changed your life and your perspective?
Completely. She has become my number one. She divides our days with my wife. I pay a lot of attention to her and I'm enjoying it. My day to day has changed. It's not that boring now so I don't have as much free time as before.

Has her birth changed your outlook on sport? Does a defeat mean less and a win mean more?
To be honest, no. This part hasn't changed in my head. But now I don't get as annoyed at small things anymore because the real problems are not this. There are much more important things in life.

You were able to exchange shirts with your idol Cristiano Ronaldo after Hungary's World Cup qualifying draw with Portugal in October. What did you speak to him about after the game?
After the game ended, I asked him if I could get his shirt and he said that of course he hadn't forgotten [Ronaldo had promised to give him the shirt when Hungary faced Portugal back in September]. He gave it to me inside and signed it for me. I left it at home in Hungary. I will frame it and put it in my home somewhere.

Growing up in Fehervar, did you always believe that one day you'd reach this point in your career?
I never thought for a moment that I would not be able to make it. I worked hard to reach the goals that I had set out for myself every day. I wanted to go to the biggest leagues and the biggest teams and to achieve things that I, the people close to me, and the people of Hungary could be proud of. It's not every year that Hungarians achieve something like this [winning the Premier League].

After winning the Premier League last season, how much does it motivate you to win it again this season?
It is in everybody's mind. Everyone would be happy if we could do it again. But the season is long and there are many things that we have to pay attention to. We take everything game by game and will try to work towards being able to win just like last season.

Arsenal and Manchester City have both strengthened. Does that increase the pressure on Liverpool?

Idol...Szoboszlai faced Cristiano Ronaldo in 2026 World Cup qualifying in October

Arsenal have a great team. Manchester City have a great team. Chelsea as well. I think this season is going to be very tough. But it wasn't easy last year either.

> "I never thought for a moment that I would not be able to make it…I wanted to go to the biggest leagues and the biggest teams"

There was a lot of player movement at Liverpool over the summer. What is the atmosphere like in the dressing room at the moment? How much have things changed?
Like you said we have had new players come in, some have left. It is really easy to integrate into our team. We really welcome the new players. We try to help them and support everyone as much as we can.

New Reds team-mate...Florian Wirtz followed Szoboszlai in making the move from Germany to Anfield

A lot of the new players came to Liverpool from the Bundesliga, just like yourself. Have you been able to use some of your experience to help the likes of Hugo Ekitike, Florian Wirtz and Jeremie Frimpong?
I think when it comes to on the pitch matters they don't need help. They know what signing for this club means, and that this is not the Bundesliga anymore but the Premier League. Outside of the pitch, I have tried to help in all areas.

Mohamed Salah has recently spoken about how you're one of the players he tries to motivate. What sort of advice does he give you? And how much does he inspire you?
I really look up to him. But to me, I don't look up to him like a superstar. I look up to him as Mo. He's one of the guys who has helped me with everything from day one. When I didn't get as many opportunities towards the end of my first season, he pushed me and helped me. He taught me how it's really important to take care of yourself. I have learned a lot from him, and we have a great relationship.

You're not the only Hungarian at Liverpool anymore. How has your life changed since Milos Kerkez and Armin Pecsi arrived at the club? And what is your relationship with the two of them?
I get on really well with both of them. We help each other all the time. To me, Milos is like a little brother who can really get on your nerves sometimes, but I know how to deal with him and he listens to me.

How do you overcome difficult periods in your life on and off the pitch?
There are always difficult moments on and off the pitch. It always changes. Sometimes the team needs you, sometimes they don't. Sometimes you're in great form, sometimes you're not. It's always up to you how you react. I feel like so far, I've been able to deal with the difficult times quite well and I hope that continues.

There are a lot of things happening in your life right now – how do you relax in your free time?
Right now, I don't have a lot of time to relax. There are a lot of games. We play away, we travel, we come back home and then sleep. Sometimes I can relax a little bit before I come to the national team when I get a few days off. If that happens, I spend it with my family and friends.

You've become a superstar back home in Hungary. Does that attention put pressure on you, or does it not affect you?
I try not to think about it. But naturally, sometimes I feel the pressure, too. On the pitch, I have been able to deliver some important moments for my country, so now it has become an expectation in Hungary and that comes with pressure. But I just try to give my maximum for club and country and produce big performances to help the team.

You have had two managers at Liverpool so far. What's the difference between Jurgen Klopp and Arne Slot?
They're different managers. I don't want to

Premier League winner... Szoboszlai celebrates with the trophy

Hungary's superstar...Szoboszlai has captained his country since November 2022

go into the tactics but both of them are great managers, and I owe a lot to them. I will be forever grateful to both.

What have you learnt so far working under Arne Slot?
Many things. From how to play between the lines, making runs from deep or arriving in front of the goal from open play. Honestly, he has taught me a lot of things.

Last season you played as a No.10, but this season you have often played as a right-back. Your managers trust you to play in a lot of positions, why do you think that is?
To be honest, I don't know. You have to ask my managers. I think it comes from growing up playing as a central midfielder. In my opinion, a central midfielder can play any position on the pitch a lot easier. The midfield is where a lot of the action happens in training and in the matches. You always have to be ready in that position so if you play wider, you will feel like you have a lot more time on the ball and a lot more space ahead of you straight away. When I play as a right-back I think that's one of the reasons why I can solve these situations.

What are your goals for the future? How do you want people to remember you?
I want to be a role model for children in Hungary but if it's possible the whole world. I want to be a player who most people will see the good in. I want everyone to remember my name and know who I am maybe even 100 years from now.

If football didn't exist, did you ever think about what you would do?
I don't know what I would be if I couldn't be a footballer. This thought never really crossed my mind. I didn't have a plan B. It was always football for me.

> "In my opinion, a central midfielder can play any position on the pitch a lot easier"

Faith from the coach...Liverpool boss Arne Slot has used Szoboszlai in a variety of positions

World Cup aspirations ...Szoboszlai celebrates scoring a crucial equaliser v Portugal in qualifying

We only ask because recently you posted a video of yourself on Instagram wearing a suit and looking like the next James Bond. How much do you enjoy fashion and these kinds of photo-shoots?
I enjoy it a lot. I love fashion and I try to pay a lot of attention to the clothes that I wear. I like dressing formally and casually. If I have to, I will wear a suit just like in that video. Maybe sometimes I will wear clothes that most people wouldn't even think about, but I enjoy it.

This season, the Champions League final will be played in Hungary at the Puskas Arena in Budapest. How much of an extra motivation is that for you to reach the final?
It's huge. I don't think there could be a better story than this. My dream has always been to win the Champions League. I now have the opportunity to be playing in a team that has a chance to reach the final and to be in Hungary. Honestly, it would be like a fairy tale.

Hungary have not qualified for the World Cup in 40 years. How determined are you to finally break the curse and help the nation qualify for the tournament?
It's in the back of my mind almost every day. I think about what would happen if we did it but it's still far away. I think it's on everybody's mind that we haven't been at the tournament for 40 years and we could be the players to do it again and give renewed hope to Hungarian football.

What are your short-term goals? What would you like to achieve this season?
If we are talking about this season that's a long-term goal. The short-term goals for me are always about the next game. To put in a good performance that the team needs. Then we prepare for the game after that.

Interview by Bence Bocsak

Champions League dream...this season's final will be played in Szoboszlai's home country

STEPHEN CONSTANTINE

"Maybe my achievements don't get enough respect because they are outside of Europe"

In a globe-spanning coaching career, Stephen Constantine has seen everything. From dealing with dysfunctional federations to coaching during a civil war, the former India and Pakistan head coach looks back on his rollercoaster journey

You have managed India twice in the past, and recently came close to being appointed by the country again. How did it feel to miss out on the job to Khalid Jamil?
I respect and understand why they selected Khalid because he has done some good things. However, I do think they made a mistake by not bringing me back.

My track record speaks for itself. The highlight of my first spell [2002-2005] was winning the LG Cup [with the Under-23s]. We were not expected to beat Vietnam on their home patch. It was a major boost for Indian football, and over 10,000 fans greeted us when we got back to Kolkata. It was my first international trophy, so very special. When I returned [2015-2019], India were ranked 173rd by FIFA. In the space of just over two years I played my part in taking them inside the top 100. I took them to the Asian Cup. We beat Thailand 4-1 in our first game [India's first win in the competition for 55 years]. Had it not been for a 91st-minute penalty against Bahrain, we would've been the first Indian team to reach the knockout phase.

So why did you leave after the tournament?
When I was appointed, I told the president I would take India to the Asian Cup. I did that, so it was a case of mission accomplished. Had they offered me a contract extension, I would have stayed.

Jamil is the first Indian to lead the national team in 13 years. Doesn't his appointment reassure homegrown coaches that the top job in men's football isn't necessarily the preserve of foreigners?
Khalid had no previous experience in international football. The Indian team is in freefall. I believe that the majority of players and the wider Indian football industry would've been happy for me to come back. It goes without saying not everyone would have been pleased, and that's because I make it about the team and not about the egos of individual players.

But how can Jamil gain experience if he's not given the opportunity in the first place?
That's a fair point but he could've managed the Under-23 team and, if successful, been promoted to the seniors. I wish him well, I genuinely do. I may not agree with the federation's decision, but I respect it.

As a country with a rich football history and a population of close to 1.45 billion, why is the India national team in "freefall"?
At the [2019] Asian Cup the average age of the players was around 23. It was a very young team. The foundations were in place for success in future tournaments. The results under Igor Stimac were underwhelming. He won the SAFF [South Asian Football Federation] Championship and other regional competitions, and I did the same. But with India's resources winning SAFF should be a given. And yes, Stimac did take India to the [2023] Asian Cup, but when they did get to Qatar they lost all three games and didn't score a single goal.

After Stimac, Manolo Marquez came in, but he was coaching Goa in the ISL [Indian Super League] at the same time. Such an arrangement was doomed from the start. It would've been very difficult for him to juggle the two. The national team job is a full-time position, in my opinion.

The real test for India is the Asian Cup and World Cup qualifiers. It is easy to say: "We will qualify for the 2034 or 2038 World Cup", but they are vague statements when there is no blueprint in place.

You were head coach of Pakistan from 2023 to 2025. How would you describe your time there?
Unbelievable. Where do I start? I'd spent a long time working in South Asia, so I didn't go into the job completely blind. At the same time, you can't cover all bases. You can't discount the element of surprise. As a head coach I've got enough on my plate with team selection, training, tactics, scouting, and looking at the opposition and how to break them down. With Pakistan I ended up getting involved in chasing up match fees, dealing with visas and accommodation.

If you tell some people in Europe about some of the stories, they wouldn't believe you. For a match against Tajikistan, we left Pakistan in three separate groups. Nine of the players ➤

Favourite win... Pakistan players celebrate beating Cambodia in October 2023

turned up on the morning of the game, and that was thanks to the efforts of the Pakistan Air Force and Pakistani Embassy. Had they not got involved it would have been 11 against seven.

On another occasion it took us 15 hours to get to Jordan, partly because there weren't enough funds for direct flights. We got there at 1am and the hotel they booked for us was horrendous. I demanded we move to another one.

Too many times, it felt like we were going on to the pitch not just with one hand behind our back but two.

The Pakistan Football Federation (PFF) has been suspended by FIFA three times since 2017, but now has a new president and a new head coach in Nolberto Solano. What does the future hold for football in the country?

If the new regime prioritises football rather than other agendas, then I don't see why Pakistan can't become a force in South Asia. Football is very popular in Pakistan and don't let anyone tell you otherwise. The talent and passion are there.

A key issue is that there is no domestic league. Players therefore are not playing and training regularly. Their fitness and diets are all over the place. They are not being coached. It would take time to form a national league. Not to mention finance. My preference would be to initially start with state or province leagues. They don't have to be the best in the world, but they need to provide a platform where players are playing on a weekly basis. That's the first step and then you build on that.

What was your highlight in Pakistan?

That's easy, the win over Cambodia [in October 2023]. It was Pakistan's first-ever World Cup qualifying win. There was a great atmosphere inside the Jinnah Stadium. It wasn't full but it was a good crowd. Bear in mind this was Pakistan's first home game since 2015.

After the final whistle I looked around and I saw grown men in tears. They were tears of joy. You just don't know and appreciate what it took behind the scenes to get that match to take place. It's a day I'll never forget.

After that win, Pakistan got through to the second round of qualifying in a group with Saudi Arabia, Jordan and Tajikistan. Judging by social media, some supporters expected the team to go all the way and win the World Cup...

I think it's fair to say some of them got a bit carried away, but I don't blame them. Let them dream. They had been starved of international football.

It's the story of my life, to end up in the Group of Death. Those three teams are powerhouses in Asia. Some of the Pakistani media were unhappy at the performances and results against Saudi Arabia. I told them that they have to be realistic. They know the major obstacles we face just to get players on the pitch. Playing the likes of Saudi Arabia is our World Cup final.

India icons...Constantine alongside India's all-time top appearance maker and record goalscorer Sunil Chhetri

India coach...directing his players at the 2019 Asian Cup

You've travelled around the world. Which places and incidents stay in your mind?
I have an app which tells me I've travelled to 92 countries so far and I'm not yet done.

I try to adapt to my surroundings. In Nepal I wore traditional clothing to some of the games. In Sudan and Pakistan, which are majority Muslim countries, I fasted during Ramadan. I am the foreigner. I'm the one that has to adapt. I try to eat the local cuisines. I pick up phrases in various languages, which breaks the ice. Small gestures make a big difference.

I've been to the Azadi Stadium in Iran, which officially holds around 80,000 but on matchdays over 100,000 find their way in. I've seen and heard the Blue Wall in Japan.

I went to North Korea with India for an Olympic qualifier. Over 50,000 people inside the stadium but you could hear a pin drop. The match was played in virtual silence. The only noise was when they scored, but there was no shouting or jumping up and down. Just polite applause. From the minute you arrive to the moment you leave North Korea was a surreal experience.

When I arrived in Sudan, the country's leader was charged with war crimes and threatened with arrest. I was told by the British Embassy to leave. But I had a training session organised for the next day, so I ignored them. There was a rule that I could only pick players who were based in the capital, Khartoum. However, I wanted to see some players who were based at the other end of the country. The president of the football federation told me that they couldn't offer me security and advised me not to travel. I convinced my driver to go. We were about 45 minutes away when a military style jeep appeared out of nowhere. There were about eight guys carrying AK 47s. Their faces were covered, and they were dangling from the side of this jeep. They pulled me out of the car and bundled me into the jeep. I was s******* myself. I'm thinking, "this is the end." I couldn't communicate with them because they spoke no English. Turns out they were the police and they were giving me a personal escort to the ground.

> "After the final whistle I looked around and I saw grown men in tears. They were tears of joy…it's a day I'll never forget"
>
> Constantine on leading Pakistan to their first-ever World Cup qualifying win

That was the only time I feared for my safety in Sudan.

Pakistan head coach ...Constantine's last game with the country was in June 2025

What does the future hold for you?
I would love to get a job back home in England. Maybe my achievements don't get the respect because they are outside of Europe. It's difficult if you are outside of the system – people don't always want to consider someone out of the box, and I'd be your classic outside of the box.

I recently finished my MSc in Sports Directorship. I love coaching, it is my life, but as a coach you can only influence 30 or 40 people. As a director of sport, you can influence ten times that in an organisation.

I live in Cyprus so if a job comes up in Europe, then that's not an issue. Otherwise, I'll be on my travels.

Interview by Imran Azam

HUGO BROOS

"What's better and what's nicer than going to a World Cup?"

The South Africa head coach reflects on an eventful World Cup qualifying campaign and looks ahead to next year's finals, AFCON and retirement

A three-point deduction for fielding Teboho Mokoena when he should have been suspended in the World Cup qualifiers made life difficult for you, but you finally secured your place in the 2026 tournament...
We were in a very good position, and then suddenly they [FIFA] deducted the three points. I said it before, we made a mistake, but we never thought that we would have points [deducted] six months after it happened. That shows the pressure that some countries put on FIFA to reopen the case, because there was a disciplinary commission that at three times [after the incident in March] never dealt with the matter. We felt, okay, there was no complaint. There was nothing. And then one week before the last two crucial qualifiers, suddenly we were deducted three points.

How much extra pressure did that situation put on you?
It was a little bit tricky, certainly after our draw against Zimbabwe. But I always said that Nigeria would also help us. They helped us by doing what they had to do by beating Benin in their last qualifier. I was a little bit afraid because Nigeria were not really convincing during the qualifiers, although they were convincing in the end. We looked at all the scenarios before our last qualifier and felt we had to beat Rwanda by two goals to be safe as long as Nigeria also won. But I said to the players: "Don't look too much to try to score two goals, because you might forget the game plan". But when after five minutes we scored the first goal, I knew that we would score the second. Nigeria were also beating Benin, so at half-time I felt: "Okay, things are done now."

You were appointed as South Africa's national team manager in 2021. What was your approach to the role?
When I came to South Africa, the question that I asked myself was: "Why is it possible that a country like South Africa is not a regular at the AFCON and cannot qualify for the World Cup?" And I think after a year, I knew why. Because when I saw the local league games, many teams played with old players – the young players didn't get a chance. And when I talked with someone about that, they said: "Yes, but they don't have experience." But how can you give experience to a player when you don't let them play? So I started to look for young players, and I think we succeeded. And why young players? Because those guys are hungry. They still want to prove something for themselves, but also they want to go to a World Cup. I was an older player myself and the fire is gone because you've already done it before. So that was, for me, the first thing to do. And then, when you have a team and that confidence, what's better and what's nicer than going to a World Cup? This team did everything for that. They fought for it.

What are your team's characteristics?
We had games where we played good football, but the games against Nigeria were not football games. They were fights and we fought for it. When you have that mentality, you can achieve a lot. I think in the last three years, we've achieved a lot. We're going to AFCON for a second time in a row and then the World Cup, and it's not finished. We can still go further and have more progression when you see what's coming with our Under-17s and Under-20s playing at the World Cup.

What can you achieve at the upcoming Africa Cup of Nations and the World Cup next year?
I really hope that in AFCON, we do as well as the last one [South Africa were third two years ago] and hopefully even better. But I hope that with all those high-level tournaments, and certainly next year at the World Cup, that players will have the opportunity to go to better leagues because they deserve it first of all, and they need it also. And if we can make that step in the future, you will see that South Africa will get even better than they already are now.

What does the future hold for you personally?
I was at a World Cup at the end of my career as a player, and now I will do it again. I think this is the right moment, next year after the World Cup, to end my career and enjoy the next 20 years with my family, my grandchildren and my children. But first of all, there is some work to do, and we will try to do it well. When you work with a squad for four years, you know everything about that group. You know how they will react when there is success. You know how they will react when there is no success. We trust each other, we have confidence in each other, and I'm so happy that we succeeded to qualify for the World Cup.

Interview by Mark Gleeson

6 of the best

Stars of the Under-20 World Cup

Nick Bidwell reveals the standout talents from the tournament in Chile

1 Maher CARRIZO

ARGENTINA

Exceptionally gifted Velez Sarsfield forward, whose flair, brutal changes of rhythm and goalscoring ability proved so invaluable to silver medallists Argentina. Although nominally a left-footed right-winger, in practice Carrizo can pop up anywhere along the front-line, always hard to dispossess, elusive and quick-thinking. He has set consistently high standards for the young *Albiceleste* this year, contributing three goals and an assist in this competition and performing equally well in the South American Championship back in January, a tournament in which he netted four and made three others. Wonderfully dynamic, brave and opportunistic, he made his senior debut for Velez early in 2024. Rumoured to be on the radar of River Plate.

2 Benjamin CREMASCHI

USA

Part of a US side who suffered the frustration of a fifth consecutive U20 World Cup quarter-final defeat, the central midfielder had the consolation prize of the tournament's Golden Boot. One of four players to score five goals – alongside France's Lucas Michal, Yassir Zabiri of Morocco and Neiser Villarreal (see opposite) – his two assists gave him the edge over his rivals. Besides those fine statistics, he embodied all-purpose influence too, a driving force in the middle of the pitch, switched on tactically and extremely hard-working. The Florida native, the first product of the Inter Miami academy to wear US national team colours, is spending the current season on loan at Serie A side Parma. He remains eligible for both the Italy national team and Argentina, with his father Pablo playing international rugby for the latter.

3 Rion ICHIHARA
JAPAN

Liverpool, plus a number of Bundesliga clubs, are rumoured to be keeping tabs on this classy centre-back and no doubt would have appreciated the Japan captain's high-calibre displays at these finals. In Samurai Blue's perfect start to the tournament (three group-stage victories and as many clean sheets), Ichihara was impeccable, excellent in his ability to organise, intercept and cover, confident and assured on the ball and dominant aerially. He also found the time to convert a couple of penalties against Egypt and Chile, deservedly named Player of the Match in both fixtures. Rock solid as well in Japan's somewhat unfortunate round-of-16 defeat to France. Currently plays his club football in Japan's second tier for the Red Bull outfit Omiya Ardija.

4 Othmane MAAMMA
MOROCCO

Within the outstanding collective put together by Atlas Cubs coach Mohamed Ouahbi, the Watford winger proved Morocco's trump card in their history-making triumph. All guile, clairvoyance and audacious decisiveness, he has already been compared to a young Cristiano Ronaldo and aesthetically at least seems to have modelled his game on the Portuguese great. Maamma's work in Chile often had an other-worldly vibe, particularly when scoring with a sensational bicycle kick in the group-stage win over Brazil and supplying a sublime backheel assist as the US were seen off in the last eight. Morocco's successful counter-attacking strategy essentially revolved around his qualities: his excellence in one-on-one duels, acceleration and directness.

5 Neiser VILLARREAL
COLOMBIA

Nicknamed "Ney" because of his long-held adoration of the Brazilian frontrunner Neymar, the *Cafeteros* striker went on quite a journey in this tournament. Goalless and unsatisfied in the group matches, his five-goal exploits – including a memorable hat-trick in the stunning 3-2 win against favourites Spain in the quarter-finals – propelled the Colombians to a well-deserved bronze medal. The top scorer in the 2025 South American Under-20 Championship with eight goals, the youngster currently plays for leading Colombian club Millonarios but is due to join Brazilian outfit Cruzeiro in December. The move to Brazil surely is just a stepping-stone to an elite future in the Premier League or La Liga.

6 Lisandru OLMETA
FRANCE

The son of ex-Toulon, Racing Paris, Marseille and Lyon keeper Pascal Olmeta, Lisandru may play in the same position as his father, but certainly has not inherited the latter's extreme showmanship. Whereas Olmeta senior was as spectacular as he was unconventional, young Lisandru is more understated when going about his business, a last-line-of-defence with no apparent weaknesses. Especially impressive in France's last-16 win over Japan, his calmness and sharp reflexes were key ingredients in *Les Bleuets'* fourth-place finish in Chile. Currently on loan at Bastia from Lille.

THE BEST OF BRAZIL

The 2025 Copa Libertadores final sees the two best teams in South America go head to head

Words: Tim Vickery

After 154 matches played since early February, the 66th edition of the Copa Libertadores has boiled down to a final showdown between South America's two outstanding sides of the last few years – teams who are also caught in a duel for the Brazilian league.

The meeting of Flamengo and Palmeiras is a historic occasion. It means that the title will go to Brazil for a seventh consecutive year – an unprecedented period of domination – and that Brazil will pull level with Argentina on 25 Libertadores triumphs apiece. Whoever comes out on top on November 29 will also become the first Brazilian team to win the title four times.

This is heavy stuff, as Palmeiras midfielder Andreas Pereira knows all too well. The former Manchester United and Fulham midfielder still lives in the shadow of four years ago, when these teams met in the 2021 final. Then playing for the other side, his mistake – he was caught in possession deep inside his own half – cost Flamengo the title in a tight game.

What type of game will this one be? There is the evidence of their league meeting in the Maracana in mid-October. Flamengo continued their recent good run of results against Palmeiras with a 3-2 win, leading 3-1 at the interval and only conceding the second deep into stoppage time.

With his new front-two formation, Palmeiras coach Abel Ferreira set out to press high. Instead of their usual style, working the ball through midfield, Flamengo went direct. Palmeiras had more shots, passes and possession, but it was Flamengo's match.

There are plenty of reasons to believe that the Libertadores final will be different. For starters, Ferreira has a number of options available to him, and has a rare capacity to switch personnel and systems for games and during games. He is difficult to predict, but often has a cautious approach to the big matches, a mentality that may well be reinforced by the events of October's clash.

Flamengo also have some doubts about the key man in that 3-2 win, centre-forward Pedro. An excellent finisher, he is seen by many in Brazil as a starter for next year's World Cup, but he lacks pace and at times appears to offer little outside the penalty area. Frustrated with him, coach Filipe Luis has often left him on the bench, once publicly rebuked him for lack of effort, and has at times treated him as a luxury player to be unleashed against weak opponents but ineffective against the strong. Against Palmeiras, however, Pedro gave a fine response, leading the line with aplomb. It was one of the best all-round displays of his career – but three days later, he fractured an arm in the first leg of the semi-final, and faces a race to get back in time for the decider.

Even with Pedro, Flamengo have struggled for goals in an uneven campaign. But the fact that they have scored only 12 to the 30 of Palmeiras gives a misleading impression of the typical characteristics of these teams. Flamengo normally like to have the ball, and that will probably be the case against a Palmeiras side likely to sit deeper than in October in order to create space for Vitor Roque to run behind the defensive line. Flamengo's possession game typically looks to suck in the opposition, and if they are unable to work the ball through the middle, they frequently look to switch the play to Guillermo Varela, arriving from right-back as an element of surprise. They struggled against the Argentine sides who blocked this strategy by fielding five at the back, making it possible that Palmeiras will open up with three centre-backs.

While Pedro is a doubt, Flamengo's Ecuadorian forward Gonzalo Plata is a certain absentee after being sent off in the second leg of the semi-final. Others will also probably be ruled out; Brazil's calendar is unrelenting. Both these teams played the Club World Cup at full tilt, and the race for the league title leaves no respite. It will be a welcome surprise if there are no injury casualties.

It is to be hoped that tiredness, tension and excesses of rivalry do not take a heavy toll on what could be a wonderful showpiece occasion. This looks like the best final of the Libertadores in years, a battle of two well-coached teams who now have pockets deep enough to go shopping in Europe. Fans from all over the world should have their eyes glued to events in Lima on November 29.

Brazil's top two... Palmeiras and Flamengo are also locked in a domestic title race

THE ROAD TO THE FINAL

FLAMENGO

GROUP STAGE

Deportivo Tachira 0-1 **Flamengo**
Flamengo 1-2 Central Cordoba
LDU Quito 0-0 **Flamengo**
Central Cordoba 1-1 **Flamengo**
Flamengo 2-0 LDU Quito
Flamengo 1-0 Deportivo Tachira

LAST 16

Flamengo 1-0 Internacional
Internacional 0-2 **Flamengo**
Flamengo win 3-0 on aggregate

QUARTER-FINALS

Flamengo 2-1 Estudiantes
Estudiantes 1-0 **Flamengo**
2-2 on agg; Flamengo win 4-2 on pens

SEMI-FINALS

Flamengo 1-0 Racing Club
Racing Club 0-0 **Flamengo**
Flamengo win 1-0 on aggregate

PALMEIRAS

GROUP STAGE

Sporting Cristal 2-3 **Palmeiras**
Palmeiras 1-0 Cerro Porteno
Bolivar 2-3 **Palmeiras**
Cerro Porteno 0-2 **Palmeiras**
Palmeiras 2-0 Bolivar
Palmeiras 6-0 Sporting Cristal

LAST 16

Universitario 0-4 **Palmeiras**
Palmeiras 0-0 Universitario
Palmeiras win 4-0 on aggregate

QUARTER-FINALS

River Plate 1-2 **Palmeiras**
Palmeiras 3-1 River Plate
Palmeiras win 5-2 on aggregate

SEMI-FINALS

LDU Quito 3-0 **Palmeiras**
Palmeiras 4-0 LDU Quito
Palmeiras win 4-3 on aggregate

Ferreira's fledglings

Palmeiras' long-serving boss Abel Ferreira is aiming for his third Copa crown with an exciting group of players

The sprawling metropolis of Sao Paulo has the largest community of Italian descendants in the world – even more than Rome – and its football team is Palmeiras.

Founded in 1914, the club were originally called Palestra Italia, until the Second World War made that a bad idea. Without losing their Italian identity, they adopted a more tropical name, which translates as "palm trees." They grew as the city grew around them, vying for local supremacy with Corinthians, their most traditional rivals, and Sao Paulo. In 1961, they were the first Brazilian club to play in the final of the Copa Libertadores. Their great, artistic side of the late 1960s-early '70s lost another final in 1968.

After a long dry run, the titles came rolling in in the 1990s, when they were bankrolled by Italian dairy giants Parmalat, and they won their first Libertadores in 1999. The collapse of Parmalat led to hard times, with the club relegated in 2002 and again in 2012. But the glory days have returned in the past decade, supported by the complete rebuild of their stadium in 2015. The Allianz Parque is widely regarded as the best of Brazil's new arenas. The synthetic pitch is controversial, but it is part of the financial package, enabling concerts to be staged there.

Palmeiras have gained a reputation for sound administration, with businesswoman president Leila Pereira keeping a close eye on spending. And the coffers have been filled as a consequence of their magnificent youth development work, with Estevao (Chelsea), Endrick (Real Madrid) and Luis Guilherme (West Ham United) bringing in huge transfer fees.

The commitment to youth remains – only Uruguayan outfit Boston River have fielded a younger side than Palmeiras in this year's competition – even if the youngest and brightest star, Estevao, has moved on, while 20-year-old striker Vitor Roque is the most expensive signing in the history of the Brazilian game so not exactly a rising prospect.

But the undoubted star of the show is Portuguese head coach Abel Ferreira, who completed five years in charge – an absolute eternity by Brazilian standards – on the day that Palmeiras made it through to this year's final.

Relatively unknown and unheralded on his arrival in 2020, Ferreira has stamped his imposing personality all over the club. There is much of a young Jose Mourinho in him, both in his cunning intelligence and capacity to change matches in mid-flow, and also in the excesses of his touchline antics and constant complaints. It is entirely possible that without the histrionics he may even have been offered the Brazil job.

Ferreira quickly won the confidence of his players – "he always has a plan" became a refrain from the dressing room – and a pair of Libertadores titles followed in 2020 and 2021. Was he primarily a cup coach, with a cautious mentality unsuited to the accumulation of league points? He put that one to bed by winning the league in 2022 and 2023, but 2024 was barren. And then, despite the club finally spending big, the Club World Cup was a disappointment. Palmeiras travelled north with high hopes, but fell in the quarter-finals. And, unlike Brazil's three other participants, they could not go home carrying the warm memory of a famous victory over European opposition. Was Ferreira really the right man to work with the attacking talent that the club had acquired? It looked as if his glorious reign was heading for a melancholy end.

> The undoubted star of the show is Portuguese head coach Abel Ferreira, who completed five years in charge on the day that Palmeiras made it through to this year's final

Instead, he managed to reinvent himself and his side. Vitor Roque was not firing after arriving in February, but Ferreira understood that his new player is not a conventional centre-forward, squeezed in between the centre-backs, but one who needs space. So he pushed the ex-Barcelona man out towards the left channel, and formed a front pair with the neat and intelligent Argentine Jose Manuel "Flaco" Lopez. The new, front-foot Palmeiras got themselves back on track – until Ferreira made a very uncharacteristic error in the first leg of the semi-final.

The altitude of Quito requires concessions. A more conservative game plan is advised. But against LDU, Ferreira went with an absurdly attacking line-up. The Ecuadorians walked through his team's midfield, and could have gone into half-time with much more than a 3-0 lead. They should surely have done more to drive home their advantage in the second half. The door was left open for Palmeiras and, on an intense night in Sao Paulo, they turned the screw from start to finish and got the four goals they needed.

It was an emotional way for Ferreira to commemorate five years in charge. And the celebrations will get bigger still if he can emulate the Flamengo of 2019 and pull off a Libertadores and league double. Palmeiras, then, are still moving forward with Ferreira – or in the Italian vernacular, *avanti*.

Tim Vickery

Leading scorer ...Jose Manuel "Flaco" Lopez has seven goals in this year's competition

Brazil's first super club

Another Libertadores victory would cement Flamengo's status as a bona fide giant of Brazilian football

Flamengo of Rio de Janeiro will be playing their fifth Copa Libertadores final, and their fourth in the last seven years. Victory will make them the most successful Brazilian club in the history of the competition.

It is a revealing statistic. Formed as a rowing club in 1895, Flamengo took up football in 1912 and have been a giant for many decades. In the 1930s, a team associated more with the elite acquired the popular touch by signing the three leading black players of the day, and built a huge national support base. In the 1950s, a run of success cemented their relationship with the newly built Maracana stadium. And in the '70s and '80s, they had a fine side spearheaded by the magnificent Zico.

But there was often an element of chaos together with the glory, and financial problems were frequent.

Then, around a decade ago, as money started to flow into Brazilian football, putting it on a different level from the rest of the continent, Flamengo got their act together. Finally, they managed to leverage the immense size of their support into money in the bank and success on the field.

First, they patiently sorted out the finances, hitting upon a model where they would sell their best youth products – including Vinicius Junior to Real Madrid and Lucas Paqueta to Milan – to finance a squad of impressive and increasing depth. The silverware then started rolling in, and Flamengo now play almost all of their games in capacity stadiums. They can fill grounds all over Brazil, counting on a massive following across the giant country, especially in the North East, far away from their Rio home. They are a genuinely national institution. Dramatist Nelson Rodrigues, Brazil's most influential writer on football, was a fan of local rivals Fluminense, but even so, he wrote that: "Every Brazilian has been a Flamengo supporter for an instant." Over the years this has been transformed into the line that: "Everyone was born Flamengo, but some have degenerated along the way." The new, organised Flamengo can certainly make a case for being the biggest club in the world outside Europe.

The key year was 2019 when, in a few magical months under Portuguese head coach Jorge Jesus, they won both the league and the Copa Libertadores in exhilarating style. 2019 set the bar, and continues to exert a strong influence.

Current head coach Filipe Luis was the left-back in that team. Bright and articulate, he is the next great hope of Brazilian coaching. On his staff is former centre-back Rodrigo Caio, while two members of the famed 2019 attacking quartet are still playing. One, striker Bruno Henrique, now seems to be a declining force, but the same does not apply to playmaker Giorgian De Arrascaeta. A consistent supplier of moments of class, De Arrascaeta scored all of Uruguay's goals at the last World Cup, and heads a large foreign contingent in the Flamengo dressing room, the consequence of cherry-picking from neighbouring nations. Of the side that lined up for the second leg of the semi-final, six were non-Brazilian, plus Brazil-born Italy midfielder Jorginho, who has proven such an important acquisition since arriving from Arsenal in June. So deep is the squad that Saul Niguez, impressive since his move from Spain, was left on the bench along with a couple of other recent signings, Brazil full-back Danilo (from Juventus) and Emerson Royal (Milan), who was last capped in 2023.

> The new, organised Flamengo can certainly make a case for being the biggest club in the world outside Europe

It is striking, then, that such a strong side, so free scoring in the domestic league, struggled so much on the way to the Libertadores final. The 12 games produced just 12 goals, and only one truly outstanding performance: away to compatriots Internacional in the second round. After a 1-0 home win, they were expected to come under considerable pressure. Instead, Jorginho and Saul dictated the rhythm of the game and they were comfortable 2-0 winners. Otherwise, the campaign has proved an attritional battle, including home defeat to Argentine debutants Central Cordoba in the early stages.

The hero has ended up being another member of the foreign legion, Argentine goalkeeper Agustin Rossi. In the last action of the group phase, he made an excellent save against Venezuelans Deportivo Tachira to avoid humiliating elimination. In the quarter-finals, he came up big in the penalty shootout against Estudiantes, and then broke more Argentine hearts in the semi, coming up with a man-of-the-match display to keep Racing at bay in the second leg.

Will more heroics be needed in the final? Or will Flamengo find their best form on November 29? Either way, their presence in the final is a mark of progress. Not long ago they were often knocked out in the group stages of the Libertadores. Now anything less than winning the trophy in style is seen as a disappointment.

Tim Vickery

Copa hero... Flamengo's Argentine goalkeeper Agustin Rossi

Glenn Moore

Brazil eye glory on home soil

The hosts of the 2027 World Cup are looking like serious contenders as the finals slowly come into view

There remains a year-and-a-half to go before the 2027 World Cup, with qualifying barely underway, but already favourites are starting to emerge after the autumn international break.

Two were always obvious: holders Spain, only defeated in this year's European Championship final on penalties having looked the best side in the tournament, and the Olympic champions, the United States, who will be desperate to wipe away the memory of their ignominious 2023 World Cup.

Joining this vaunted pair are Brazil. Increasingly it looks as if Arthur Elias is building a vibrant contending team with a mixture of youth and experience that could finally enable Marta to cap her incredible career with a World Cup winners' medal. Twenty years after she won silver in Shanghai, Brazil's only World Cup final appearance, that would be truly remarkable.

Is this status unexpected? After all, Brazil are the hosts and Olympic silver medallists. Yet only one host nation has ever won the event – the US on penalties in 1999 – and while Brazil pushed the US hard in the Olympic final in Paris, they scraped through the group stage in third place after one win and two losses.

Nevertheless, they capitalised on their fortune with impressive results in beating hosts France and Spain in the knockout stages before losing 1-0 to the US at the Parc des Princes.

They have continued to catch the eye, not least against England, the back-to-back European champions.

In April 2023, at Wembley, they lost the inaugural Finalissima, but only on penalties. They returned to England for the autumn internationals and spoiled their hosts' Euro 2025 homecoming party with a 2-1 victory in Manchester despite having captain Angelina sent off after just 20 minutes.

Brazil were already 2-0 up by then, but that was thoroughly deserved, their physicality and mobility overwhelming England's midfield. A player down, they matched the Lionesses who needed a generous penalty to halve the deficit.

Three days and six changes later, they won 1-0 against Euro semi-finalists Italy in Parma. Both results were achieved without a number of players who won the Copa America in August, notably Marta, Kerolin, Gio Garbelini and Gabi Portillo, which underlines the depth Elias has at his disposal. He could name a squad (albeit an attack-heavy one) consisting solely of players based in the NWSL or at major clubs in Europe and Mexico, but that is not to decry the quality of domestic-based players, as the likes of Dudinha, Duda Sampaio and Amanda Gutierres demonstrated in the recent internationals.

> After all, Brazil are the hosts and Olympic silver medallists. Yet only one host nation has ever won the event – the United States on penalties in 1999

Brazil also beat United States in April, their first win against the US in 11 years, followed by a brace of home victories over Japan. All of which bodes well for *As Canarinhas* come 2027.

Brazil's 2-1 win in San Jose was the second in a two-match series against the US, with the hosts winning the first game 2-0 in Inglewood. In October, the US hosted another pair of games against the same opponent, this time against Portugal. The shock opening 2-1 loss in Pennsylvania reflected four months without a match, said coach Emma Hayes, and the team looked back to themselves when winning the second part of the double-header 3-1 in Connecticut.

Spain recall... Jenni Hermoso

Hayes has been freshening the squad, calling up more than 50 players in 2025. The age-profile has been lowered as a golden generation gradually steps off the stage; of the 26 players in the squad to face Portugal, 16 had fewer than ten caps.

In contrast, Spain's new head coach Sonia Bermudez, taking charge of her first games since replacing Montse Tome in the summer, recalled two veterans, Jenni Hermoso, 35, and Mapi Leon, 30.

Hermoso, the player who received an unwanted kiss by then-Spanish football federation chief Luis Rubiales after the 2023 World Cup triumph, returned after missing out on *La Roja's* Euro 2025 squad, while Leon, one of *"Las 15"* who had refused to play under Tome's predecessor Jorge Vilda and the highest-level player who had not subsequently returned to the fold, was recalled after three years away from the national team.

Unlike Hayes, however, Bermudez was in no position to experiment, as her first two matches were against Sweden in the semi-finals of the UEFA Nations League. She did call in a trio of rookies, notably 17-year-old Barcelona midfielder Clara Serrajordi, who was given a debut as a substitute in the second leg.

By then, the tie had long been decided thanks to a 4-0 first-leg win in Malaga, achieved with two goals each

Statement victory... Bia Zaneratto gives Brazil the lead in their 2-1 win over England in October

from Alexia Putellas and Claudia Pina. Putellas scored again in Gothenburg to secure a 5-0 aggregate victory.

Leon went straight into the team in Malaga and looked like she had never been away, which was hardly surprising seeing as eight of her team-mates play alongside her at Barca.

The 88th-minute arrival of Hermoso, to an emotional ovation, confirmed the sense that, while most of the squad is unchanged, a new era has begun.

Germany are the other finalists after narrowly beating France 3-2 on aggregate in their semi-final. A long-range drive from Klara Buhl gave them a deserved 1-0 win in Dusseldorf in the first leg, but that was cancelled out within three minutes of the return in Caen by Melvine Malard. Still, clinical goals from Nicole Anyomi and Buhl gave the visitors a two-goal cushion, and Clara Mateo's 89th-minute reply avoided French defeat on the night but not on aggregate.

The victory was further evidence of Germany's improvement under Christian Wuck, though the matches with Spain will provide an even stiffer test. The first leg is in Kaiserslautern on November 28, the second at Atletico Madrid's ground on December 2.

And what of Euro 2025 champions England? Defeat to Brazil underlined an inability to control games, instead relying on moments of inspiration, though the Lionesses were much better in defeating Australia 3-0 three days later even before Alanna Kennedy's 18th-minute dismissal.

With the match-winners in their squad, England, as they have proven before, cannot be ruled out in Brazil. But after being drawn in the same group as Spain, at least one of them will have to go through the play-offs to qualify.

Germany and France will also be contenders, while the Asian Cup should provide an indication of Japan's status. Results since the intriguing appointment of the Dane Nils Nielsen a year ago have been mixed, but they defeated the US in winning the SheBelieves Cup in February and have a squad predominantly drawn from the WSL and NWSL.

There are two other dark horses, both with enterprising coaching appointments: the Netherlands and Canada. The Dutch are now led by Arjan Veurink, Sarina Wiegman's assistant for all three of her Euros successes, and Canada by English former Manchester United and San Diego Wave coach Casey Stoney.

As Wiegman and Hayes – the last two big tournament winners – have shown, in a sport where standards are rapidly rising, sometimes it is the quality of the coach that makes the difference.

Round-up

Three in a row...Corinthians midfielder Gabi Zanotti lifts the Copa Libertadores Femenina trophy

CORINTHIANS MAKE IT A LIBERTADORES HAT-TRICK

Corinthians have claimed a third successive Copa Libertadores title and sixth overall after defeating Colombia's Deportivo Cali 5-3 on penalties after a goalless final in Buenos Aires. Brazil forward Jhonson scored the decisive spot-kick after Cali's Kelly Ibarguen had hit the crossbar.

Both semi-finals also went to shootouts with Corinthians beating fellow Brazilians Ferroviaria 6-5 on spot-kicks after a 1-1 draw, and Cali edging out Chile's Colo-Colo 5-4 after a goalless stalemate.

With the exception of Bolivia's Always Ready, who failed to live up to their name with defeats of 7-0, 11-0 and 5-0, the 16-team competition was tight with only two of the other 28 matches featuring a team scoring more than twice, the quarter-final wins of Corinthians (4-0) and Ferroviaria (3-0).

Corinthians, whose triumph was worth $2 million, will now represent South America in the new FIFA Women's Champions Cup in London in January. They will play CONCACAF's Gotham FC in a semi-final.

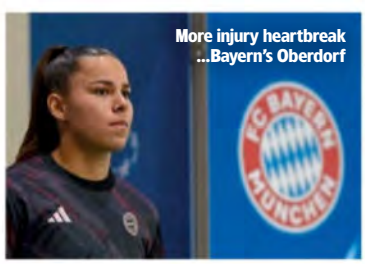
WORLD CUP EXPANSION

The 2031 World Cup continues to be expanded. Having already been increased to 48 teams from the 32 competing in 2027, it will now extend its reach to four CONCACAF host nations with Costa Rica and Jamaica set to join United States and Mexico as co-hosts.

OBERDORF SUFFERS CRUEL DOUBLE BLOW

Lena Oberdorf ruptured her right knee ACL for the second time in 15 months. The Bayern Munich and Germany midfielder, 23, who was named Young Player of the Tournament at Euro 2022, had only just returned from the previous injury which had kept her out of the 2024 Paris Olympics and Euro 2025.

England striker Michelle Agyemang and Austria keeper Manuela Zinsberger have also suffered ACL injuries.



More injury heartbreak ...Bayern's Oberdorf

EGYPT HOSTS AFRICAN CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Just 15 days before the start of the event, CAF announced Egypt would host the African Champions League with national champions Masar, from Cairo, becoming the eighth competitor. Details of how the tournament unfolded will be in next month's *World Soccer*.

SWISS GOODBYE FOR SWEDE SUNDHAGE

Switzerland chose not to renew Pia Sundhage's contract as coach despite the 65-year-old, who steered them to the last eight at Euro 2025, wishing to continue. She has been replaced by Barcelona assistant Rafel Navarro.

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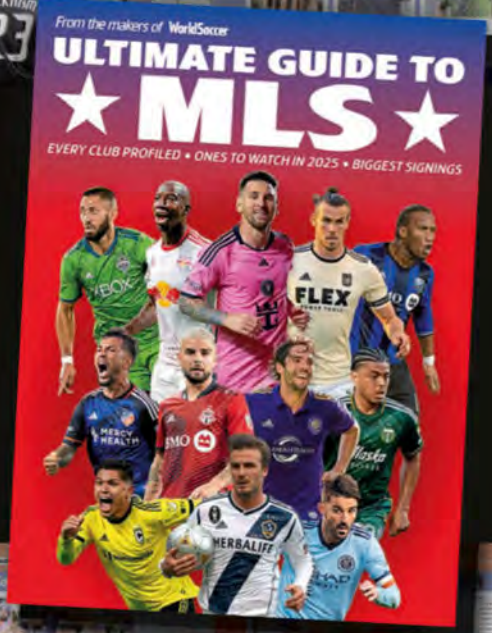

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Under-20 World Cup...Morocco triumph at Chile 2025

Chile

NICK BIDWELL

Morocco's rise continues

The North African nation's historic victory at the Under-20 World Cup is further evidence of their evolution as a footballing force

Review

Under-20 world champions... Morocco captain Houssam Essadak lifts the trophy

Morocco rising stars...Yassir Zabiri celebrates with Othmane Maamma after scoring in the final

Never more dangerous than when cast in the role of underdog, Morocco enjoyed a giant-killing spree for the ages in Chile, seeing off Spain, Brazil and France prior to defeating Argentina 2-0 in the final. Yassir Zabiri, who plays in Portugal for Famalicao, proved the hero of the hour against the much-fancied Argentines, on target with a superb direct free-kick and far-post volley from a Othmane Maamma cross.

No wonder Moroccans celebrated so ecstatically, both in Santiago and back home. This was the North African nation's first-ever world title and just the latest manifestation of the country's growing global competitiveness, following hard on the heels of a semi-final spot at the senior World Cup of 2022 and a bronze medal at the 2024 Olympics. The national federation's long-term plan to invest heavily in soccer infrastructure and youth development is paying off in spades.

"This title is a result of years of structured work," declared Morocco boss Mohamed Ouahbi. "It's a clear

Morocco head coach...Mohamed Ouahbi embraces Yassir Zabiri

example of Morocco's belief in its own youth, its local talent."

Only the second African nation to emerge victorious in an Under-20 World Cup – Ghana were the first in 2009 – Morocco certainly were hugely impressive: meticulously organised and tactically prepared by head coach Ouahbi, highly-skilled and expressive going forward and mentally strong and adaptable, with winger extraordinaire and Player of the Tournament Maamma invariably setting the tone.

Argentina, world champions at this level on a record six occasions, were red-hot favourites to prevail in the showpiece after winning all of their previous games in Chile. Yet ultimately found Morocco too hot to handle, too cute, too technical and, above all, too defensively solid. Going two down after just half an hour left Diego Placente's side with a mountain to climb and only rarely were the South Americans able to pierce Morocco's steely rear-guard resistance, their supremely well-drilled two banks of four.

> "This title is a result of years of structured work. It's a clear example of Morocco's belief in its own youth, its local talent"
>
> Morocco head coach Mohamed Ouahbi

The Argentines did not lack for heart and desire in the final, but ideas and imagination were in short supply. If only they had not been deprived of the services of their attacking midfield starlets Franco Mastantuono and Claudio Echeverri, whose respective clubs (Real Madrid and Bayer Leverkusen) refused to release them for the festival. The guile of the pair might well have unlocked the Moroccan door.

What a shame that so many European clubs, albeit under no obligation to grant permission for their players to take part in the tournament, insisted on making the competition a no-go area for their young stars. Promising Italian youngsters such as Internazionale striker Francesco Pio Esposito and Milan keeper Lorenzo Torriani were denied the chance to participate, while no fewer than 40 of France's finest had to stay home too.

It says much for the strength in depth of the French that they still managed to stick around until the final four in Chile, only succumbing to Morocco on penalties at the semi-final stage and giving a good account of themselves in the 1-0 defeat to Colombia in the third-place play-off.

Colombia, for whom it was their best showing in the competition since 2003, impressed throughout, losing just once in seven fixtures (a 1-0 semi-final defeat to Argentina) and achieving a 3-2 statement victory over Spain in the quarter-finals. With individuals of the calibre of striker Neiser Villarreal, wide-men Oscar Perea and Joel Canchimbo, and goalkeeper Jordan Garcia, Colombia's international future looks bright in every way.

Villarreal was among four players tied on five goals at the top of the scoring charts, along with USA midfielder Benjamin Cremaschi, France frontrunner Lucas Michal and the hero of the final Zabiri, with Cremaschi eventually awarded the Golden Boot on the basis of his greater number of assists.

On trial for the first time at the tournament was FIFA's new Football Video Support (FVS) system, which gives coaches the opportunity to challenge refereeing decisions and request a review. The system spawned its first successful appeal in Morocco's 2-0 win over Spain in the group stage, Atlas Cubs coach Ouahbi successfully waving a card to overturn a penalty award against his team. In the final against Argentina, Ouahbi would deploy it again, his request for a review resulting in the free-kick from which Yassir Zabiri would curl home the opening goal.

GROUP STAGE

GROUP A

	Team	P	W	D	L	Pts
1	Japan	3	3	0	0	9
2	Chile	3	1	0	2	3
3	Egypt	3	1	0	2	3
4	New Zealand	3	1	0	2	3

GROUP B

	Team	P	W	D	L	Pts
1	Ukraine	3	2	1	0	7
2	Paraguay	3	1	1	1	4
3	South Korea*	3	1	1	1	4
4	Panama	3	0	1	2	1

GROUP C

	Team	P	W	D	L	Pts
1	Morocco	3	2	0	1	6
2	Mexico	3	1	2	0	5
3	Spain*	3	1	1	1	4
4	Brazil	3	0	1	2	1

GROUP D

	Team	P	W	D	L	Pts
1	Argentina	3	3	0	0	9
2	Italy	3	1	1	1	4
3	Australia	3	1	0	2	3
4	Cuba	3	0	1	2	1

GROUP E

	Team	P	W	D	L	Pts
1	United States	3	2	0	1	6
2	South Africa	3	2	0	1	6
3	France*	3	2	0	1	6
4	New Caledonia	3	0	0	3	0

GROUP F

	Team	P	W	D	L	Pts
1	Colombia	3	1	2	0	5
2	Norway	3	1	2	0	5
3	Nigeria*	3	1	1	1	4
4	Saudi Arabia	3	0	1	2	1

*Qualified for the last 16 as one of the best third-placed teams

KNOCKOUT STAGE

LAST 16

Chile	1	USA	3
Mexico	4	Italy	0
Argentina	4	Morocco	2
Nigeria	0	South Korea	1
Ukraine	0	Paraguay	0
Spain	1	Norway	(AET) 1
Colombia	3	Japan	0
South Africa	1	France	(AET) 1

QUARTER-FINALS

Mexico	0	USA	1
Argentina	2	Morocco	3
Spain	2	Norway	1
Colombia	3	France	2

SEMI-FINALS

Argentina	1	Morocco (AET, pens)	1
Colombia	0	France	1

FINAL

Argentina	0
Morocco	2

THIRD-PLACE PLAY-OFF

Colombia	1
France	0

United States

JAMES NALTON

5 Things...

...from the 2025 MLS regular season

1 ANOTHER MVP SHOWING FROM MESSI

Lionel Messi is set to become the first player in 30 seasons of MLS to win the league's Most Valuable Player award in back-to-back years. The only other player to have won the prize twice is Predrag Radosavljevic, better known as "Preki", who did so with Kansas City Wizards in 1997 and 2003.

For a while, it looked like Messi may have left the door open for someone else to take the league's top individual gong in 2025, especially as his Inter Miami team, with their disorganised, leaky defence, failed to match Messi's level.

The winners of the 2024 Supporters' Shield failed to defend their crown, perhaps not helped by their league campaign being frequently interrupted by cup competitions. They reached the semi-finals of the CONCACAF Champions Cup, advanced from the group stage at the Club World Cup, and lost to Seattle Sounders in the Leagues Cup final.

Yet despite the disruption, Messi remained world-class, eventually becoming the obvious choice for MVP, which should be confirmed before the MLS Cup final in December. In a period between May and July, he hit braces in five consecutive games, and finished the regular league season with 29 goals and 19 assists in 28 appearances.

Shrewd appointment... Bradley Carnell celebrates with his players

2 A SECOND SHIELD FOR PHILADELPHIA UNION

While many eyes were focused on whether Inter Miami could use their games in hand to climb back to the top of the league following the Club World Cup, Philadelphia Union kept their heads down and got the job done.

The Union won five of their last seven games to top the Eastern Conference and the overall league table to claim a second Supporters' Shield, five years on from their first.

It was justification for Union's sporting director Ernst Tanner, who had hired former St Louis City boss Bradley Carnell to replace long-term head coach Jim Curtin at the beginning of the season. The appointment was questioned, and many predicted a difficult season for the Union, but it turned out Carnell's style was perfect for the team.

They were difficult to play against, conceding the fewest goals in 2025, but also offered enough in attack to

MVP...Lionel Messi celebrates one of his 29 MLS regular season goals for Inter Miami

win 20 games. This was epitomised by their outstanding player, left-back Kai Wagner, who registered 11 assists while also contributing in defence.

3 SAN DIEGO IMPRESS ON THEIR DEBUT

San Diego FC didn't enjoy the same pre-season fanfare as some of the league's other newcomers of recent years. But once the games began, their football spoke for itself.

Under sporting director Tyler Heaps and the coaching of Mikey Varas, the newcomers from Southern California constructed a team that broke records for points and wins by an expansion team in its first season in MLS.

Mexican Hirving Lozano was the eye-catching Designated Player signing, but it was the other DP, Anders Dreyer, who really stood out. The Dane will be in most pundits' 2025 MLS best XIs, having scored 19 goals and assisted another 19 in 34 games. At one point, he was even being spoken of as a challenger to Messi for the MVP award.

His goals saw the expansion side top the Western Conference and advance with confidence into the play-offs.

San Diego FC Designated Players...Anders Dreyer and Hirving Lozano impressed for the newcomers

4 A LEAGUE FOR FORWARDS

Along with Messi and Dreyer, several other attackers made their mark on MLS in 2025.

In total, four different players notched more than 30 goals and assists combined, with LAFC's Gabon international forward Denis Bouanga and Brazilian attacker Evander of FC Cincinnati joining Messi and Dreyer, while Nashville SC's English striker Sam Surridge challenged Messi for the Golden Boot, eventually finishing joint-second with Bouanga on 24 goals, five short of the Argentine.

LAFC's mid-season signing of Son Heung-min from Tottenham Hotspur added further firepower and helped Bouanga boost his goals tally towards the end of the year. Son himself managed nine goals and three assists in just ten games.

MLS is a league often criticised for poor defensive play, but these attacking players were simply unstoppable in 2025.

5 MLS BACK ON THE BOX?

Since its move behind the Apple TV paywall in 2023, MLS has dropped off the radar of many football watchers' schedules. There is no longer a late-night MLS game appearing on the usual channels in Europe, and even those who already subscribe to Apple TV needed to pay an extra fee for the MLS Season Pass.

It appears MLS has realised it made an error by hiding itself from potential new viewers, and has made moves to increase the availability of its matches. At local level in the US, it has added full-match replays on regional TV channels, while internationally, it made the MLS play-offs available to anyone who already subscribes to the standard Apple TV package.

Despite improvements, there is still a better balance to be struck between making money from Messi-driven subscriptions and broadcasting the league to a wider audience.

Goal machine... Nashville SC's Sam Surridge

Africa

MARK GLEESON

Berkane's rise continues in CAF Champions League

The Moroccan champions might be competition debutants but they are right among the favourites for this season's continental trophy

Five newcomers in the group phase of the 2025-26 African Champions League make for something of a refreshing look to what had become an all too familiar line-up, and one of those debutants is among the competition favourites.

Morocco's Renaissance Berkane have won the African Confederation Cup three times in the previous six seasons but, having never won their domestic title before romping to the championship in April, had never qualified for the top competition.

CAF installed them as one of the four top seeds for the group-phase draw, lining up in Group A with holders Pyramids, Power Dynamos (Zambia) and Rivers United (Nigeria).

That effectively means three group-phase newcomers in a single group along with Egypt's Pyramids, who defeated Berkane 1-0 in the African Super Cup in October.

Berkane's former president is the all-powerful Morocco FA president Fouzi Lekjaa, who also sits on the FIFA Council, CAF executive committee, and is organising the 2030 World Cup. He has constructed a state-of-the-art facility and academy in the provincial town near the Algerian border and helped turn Berkane into potential continental champions just over a decade after they won promotion to the top flight in Morocco in 2012.

Pyramids were Champions League victors last season in only their second group-phase appearance, suggesting the old order is under threat. But the likes of Al Ahly, Esperance and Mamelodi Sundowns will be hard to dislodge given their considerable experience.

Al Ahly have two former continental champions alongside them in Group B,

CAF Champions League debut ...Renaissance Berkane

Holders...can Egyptian upstarts Pyramids defend their title?

but both Royal Armed Forces (AS FAR) and JS Kabylie's success came before the Champions League era.

Cairo giants Al Ahly have made a habit of starting slowly and were far from convincing in their only qualifying round tie against Aigle Noir of Burundi, winning both legs 1-0. Since last season they have had their fair share of managerial turmoil, firing Swiss coach Marcel Koller immediately after Sundowns had edged them out in the semi-finals in April and appointing Jose Riveiro for the summer's Club World Cup. But the Spaniard proved underwhelming and was replaced by Jess Thorup in October. The Dane departed Augsburg after guiding them to 12th in last season's Bundesliga, but has precious little time with his new players before the group phase kicks off.

Morocco's Renaissance Berkane have won the African Confederation Cup three times in the previous six seasons but had never qualified for the top competition

It is a record 23rd time that Ahly will take part in the group stage, a distinction they share with Tunisia's Esperance, who were drawn in Group D alongside Petro Atletico (Angola), Simba (Tanzania) and Stade Malien, who are another of the newcomers in the group phase. The Malians have been competing in the Champions League since 2001 but in 19 previous attempts never managed to book a place in the groups before edging Nouadhibou of Mauritania in the second round of the preliminaries.

This tournament is a chance for Mamelodi Sundowns' Portuguese coach Miguel Cardoso to make it third time lucky after finishing runner-up in the last two editions. He was in charge of Esperance when they lost to Al Ahly in the 2024 final and again last season as Sundowns were beaten by Pyramids.

Sundowns have consistently been the best performers in the group stage over the last few years, yet struggled to kick on from the quarter-finals. Cardoso was employed last December to add more mettle to their side and got them to the final for the first time since their only win in 2016.

But the South African side's defeat to Pyramids was unexpected, and Cardoso's future at the club, which is owned by billionaire CAF president Patrice Motsepe, depends on success in this edition. The Pretorians' squad has been reinforced with two Portuguese signings, Nuno Santos (Vitoria Guimaraes) and Miguel Reisinho (Boavista).

Also in the group are Al Hilal from Sudan, heroically through again despite the brutal civil conflict in their country. They played their preliminary knockout fixtures in Benghazi, Libya, overcoming Kenya Police to reach the group phase but have now been given permission to play in the domestic league in Rwanda this season. Last campaign they topped the standings in Mauritania, where they and fellow Khartoum club Al Merrikh were guests.

Saint-Eloi Lupopo of the Democratic Republic of the Congo are the other newcomers in the group phase after upsetting Orlando Pirates, the South African club who reached the semi-finals last season.

Pirates melted in the humidity in Lubumbashi and lost 3-0 in the first leg of their second-round tie but bounced back to level on aggregate deep in stoppage time of the return in Soweto, before Lupopo clinched a shock victory via a penalty shootout.

New appointment... Jess Thorup has taken charge of Egyptian giants Al Ahly

THE DRAW

CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

GROUP A
- Power Dynamos
- Pyramids
- Renaissance Berkane
- Rivers United

GROUP B
- Al Ahly
- JS Kabylie
- Royal Armed Forces
- Young Africans

GROUP C
- Al Hilal
- Mamelodi Sundowns
- Mouloudia Alger
- Saint-Eloi Lupopo

GROUP D
- Esperance
- Petro Atletico
- Simba
- Stade Malien

CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

GROUP A
- USM Alger
- Djoliba
- Olympique Safi
- San Pedro

GROUP B
- Azam
- Maniema Union
- Nairobi United
- Wydad

GROUP C
- Chabab Belouizdad
- AS Otoho
- Singida Black Stars
- Stellenbosch

GROUP D
- Al Masry
- Kaizer Chiefs
- Zamalek
- ZESCO United

Tuvalu

STEVE MENARY

Using futsal as a springboard

The tiny Pacific island of Tuvalu is hoping to use futsal as a way to strengthen their case for full-time membership of the Oceania Football Confederation

2025 OFC Futsal Men's Cup...Tuvalu's players

After a two-year absence, Tuvalu returned to international football at the latest Oceania Football Confederation Futsal Cup – but only after help from abroad.

With the tiny Pacific island unable to secure full membership of the OFC, San Francisco-based tech company DeepAI stepped in with sponsorship to help cover the costs of the 1,100km trip to the 2025 event in Fiji.

"I went to Tuvalu looking for ways our team can help with their digital initiatives and infrastructure," explains Nicholas Miller, director of business at DeepAI. "I happened to take a walk one day and met Michiel, a Dutch football instructor who was there with his non-profit [organisation]. We got to talking, and he said that Tuvalu is not a full member of the OFC and hadn't played [much recently]. I thought that was unfortunate, and made the decision to sponsor them at the last minute so they could participate in the OFC futsal tournament."

Michiel van der Werf is the technical director at the Netherlands Oceania Support Federation, who coached the Tuvalu side in Fiji.

> "We are looking now for the chances of full OFC membership and of course that would benefit Tuvalu very much"
>
> Tuvalu futsal coach Michiel van der Werf

He says: "Our team was a mix of players from Tuvalu, some Tuvaluans that study in Fiji, and some diaspora players that live in New Zealand. Most of our players played at the 2023 Pacific Games at football [but] they had zero experience with futsal."

With little money for development, Tuvalu had only entered the OFC Futsal Cup three times previously since it began in 1992. They'd lost every game, which featured some thrashings, including at their most recent appearance back in 2011.

Tuvalu's last official game in any format was a 4-1 win over Northern Mariana Islands at the 2023 Pacific Games football tournament on the Solomon Islands, where two wins out of three games was a very respectable performance.

Although the recent trip to Fiji for their fourth OFC Futsal Cup appearance produced four losses, there were reasons for encouragement against strong sides; two of Tuvalu's opponents, the Solomon Islands and New Zealand, have played in the FIFA Futsal World Cup finals.

The All Whites raced into an early five-goal lead in the opening game at Suva's Vodafone Arena, but Tuvalu's Keni Vine, who played and scored in the last Pacific Games, pulled a goal back in a 6-1 defeat that was no disgrace.

Tuvalu again shipped early goals in their next game, but again managed to restore some pride, this time in a 4-1 loss to Fiji. In the third game, they came agonisingly close to a first point, equalising against Vanuatu in the last minute only to lose 3-2.

In the final game, Tuvalu conceded seven unanswered goals to eventual winners Solomon Islands, but that was an improvement on their last meeting back in 2011, which ended 16-0.

The futsal participation also served as part of a renewed attempt to upgrade Tuvalu's associate OFC membership and become the body's 12th full member.

"We are looking now for the chances of full OFC membership and of course that would benefit Tuvalu very much, because with the financial assistance we can make more things happen," says Van der Werf.

New membership criteria were set at the March 2024 OFC congress, ranging from two training venues to an international airport with a direct connection to another full OFC member. For tiny Tuvalu, fulfilling these may be a stretch but doing so would make regular international participation easier.

Tuvalu futsal coach...Michiel van der Werf

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Tales from the 211

Exploring the weird and wonderful world of football across FIFA's 211 member nations – and beyond

Trend-setters...Bayer Leverkusen's iconic look from 2023-24 has been adopted by Vietnamese pace setters Ninh Binh FC

LEVERKUSEN LOOKALIKES LEAD THE WAY IN VIETNAM

It is rare in football for a promoted club to become champions of their country. Before this season, the last team to achieve such a feat in Europe was Ararat-Armenia, who were only founded in 2017 but immediately gained promotion from the second tier and claimed the Armenian title the following campaign. But 2025 appears to be a golden year for newcomers across the continent: Thun, Wisla Plock and Valletta are making waves in Switzerland, Poland and Malta respectively, while ML Vitebsk are closing in on the title in Belarus.

The phenomenon extends to Africa and CONCACAF too, with promoted Scottland and US Sinnamary already crowned champions of Zimbabwe and French Guiana respectively. In Asia, meanwhile, new boys Ninh Binh FC sit atop the table in Vietnam at the time of writing, with over a third of the season played. Founded in Hanoi in 2015 and sponsored by LPBank, a retail bank, Ninh Binh ascended to the V. League 1 for the first time in the summer.

But what really stands out about Ninh Binh are their stark similarities to Bayer Leverkusen. Their crest bears a remarkable resemblance to the Bundesliga outfit's badge, while their kit design – a red cross on a black background – is strikingly similar to the Germans' 2023-24 strip. As the unbeaten league leaders, perhaps the similarities will carry over onto the pitch as well; Leverkusen became the champions of Germany that year without losing a single game.

CHRISTCHURCH UNITED REBRANDED FOR PRO LEAGUE

Christchurch United, one of the eight clubs set to compete in the inaugural OFC Professional League in 2026, have rebranded themselves as South Island United for the competition.

Explaining the reasons for the name change to *The Sweeper* at the OFC Pro League's soft launch event in Auckland on October 30, the club's CEO Ryan Edwards said the aim was to maximise the brand potential and unite the entire South Island behind the club.

South Island United will be joined in the competition by fellow New Zealanders Auckland FC, South Melbourne (Australia), Bula FC (Fiji), PNG Hekari (Papua New Guinea), Solomon Kings (Solomon Islands), Tahiti United (Tahiti) and Vanuatu United (Vanuatu).

Speaking at the tournament's launch event, OFC general secretary Franck Castillo confirmed that the confederation would cover the travel, accommodation and logistical costs for all eight participating teams. He added that sponsorship revenue would be redistributed to ensure the clubs' long-term financial stability.

The OFC Pro League, which Castillo says has been eight years in the making, will be Oceania's first fully-professional football competition. The opening circuit series will kick off at Auckland's Eden Park on January 17, 2026.

LATVIAN VIRSLIGA PRESIDENT PROPOSES BALTIC LEAGUE

Maksims Krivunecs, the president of Latvia's Virsliga, has proposed a Baltic League that would see clubs from Latvia, Lithuania and Estonia compete in Europe's first men's cross-border domestic competition.

Under Krivunecs' plan, teams would take on domestic opponents during the first phase, with the top four of each country progressing to a cross-border stage. Separate league tables for each country would be retained to ensure the European qualification spots are allocated fairly. Meanwhile, the bottom six teams in each country would continue to face only domestic sides and compete for a backdoor route into continental competition. The third phase would involve European and relegation play-offs.

The proposal is designed to raise the standard across all three Baltic countries and unlock commercial growth opportunities. That is particularly important to Latvia, where five of the nine different champions since independence no longer exist, mostly for financial reasons.

Krivunecs, though, estimates that there is only a 10% chance of the plan becoming reality, conceding that there could be challenges with bureaucracy, corporate structure and governance, multiple-language content distribution, and communication about the format.

COMING UP...

Lausanne-Sport v Thun
Swiss Super League, November 30
At the time of writing, newly promoted Thun led the Swiss top flight having only lost to giants Basel and Young Boys – the two sides that Lausanne had put five goals past in an otherwise mediocre campaign.

Lillestrom v Sarpsborg
Norwegian Cup final, December 6
Can second-tier champions Lillestrom cap a magnificent 2025 by winning the Norwegian Cup? Unusually, the next edition of the competition has already kicked off, as it switches from a calendar-year event to an autumn-spring one.

Celtic v Hearts
Scottish Premiership, December 7
Six weeks on from their 3-1 victory over the defending champions at Tynecastle, Hearts travel to Celtic Park knowing that another three points would propel them from title contenders to favourites.

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Internationals

2026 WORLD CUP QUALIFYING

EUROPE Section

● *16 direct slots available*

Group A

Oct 10 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 2 (Hrosovsky 18 og, Hume 81)
Slovakia 0
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – Hume, Ballard, McNair; Bradley (Magennis 90+2), McCann, S. Charles, Price, Devenny; Galbraith (Spencer 85), Reid (D. Charles 71).
Slovakia: Dubravka – Gyomber, Satka, Skriniar, Obert; Bero, Hrosovsky (Benes 89), Duda (Rigo 63); Schranz (Haraslin 63), Strelec (Mraz 89), Sauer (Tupta 82).

Oct 10 – Sinsheim
Germany 4 (Raum 12, Kimmich 21 pen, 50, Gnabry 48)
Luxembourg 0
Germany: Baumann – Kimmich, Tah, Schlotterbeck (Anton 46), Raum (Brown 82); Goretzka, Pavlovic; Adeyemi (Baku 61), Gnabry (Beier 68), Wirtz; Woltemade (Burkardt 61).
Luxembourg: Morris – Jans, Mahmutovic, Korac, Carlson; Cruz (O. Thill 67), Olesen (Dzogovic 87), Martins (S. Thill 78), Barreiro, Bohnert (Veiga 46); Dardari (Selimovic 67).
Sent off: Carlson 20.

Oct 13 – Trnava
Slovakia 2 (Obert 55, Schranz 72)
Luxembourg 0
Slovakia: Dubravka – Gyomber, Skriniar, Obert, Hancko; Duda (Hrosovsky 84); Duris (Schranz 70, Tupta 74), Bero, Rigo, Haraslin (Sauer 84); Strelec (Bozenik 84).
Luxembourg: Morris – Jans, Korac, Mahmutovic (Selimovic 85), Bohnert; Olesen (O. Thill 59); Sinani, Martins, Barreiro, Dardari (S. Thill 80); Muratovic (Curci 59).

Oct 13 – Belfast
Northern Ireland 0
Germany 1 (Woltemade 31)
Northern Ireland: Peacock-Farrell – Spencer, Hume, Ballard, McNair (Smyth 75), Devenny; Galbraith, McCann (Marshall 75), S. Charles, Price; Reid (Magennis 46).
Germany: Baumann – Kimmich, Schlotterbeck, Tah, Raum; Pavlovic (Anton 87); Adeyemi (Beier 65), Gnabry (Andrich 87), Goretzka, Wirtz (Baku 90+2); Woltemade (Burkardt 90+2).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Germany	4	3	0	1	8	3	9
Slovakia	4	3	0	1	5	2	9
N. Ireland	4	2	0	2	6	5	6
Luxembourg	4	0	0	4	1	10	0

Standings before November's international window

Group B

Oct 10 – Pristina
Kosovo 0
Slovenia 0
Kosovo: Muric – Vojvoda, I. Krasniqi, Hajdari, Aliti, Gallapeni (Sadriu 88); Al. Rrahmani (Rashica 77), Avdullahu, Rexhbecaj (Berisha 50), Muslija (Zhegrova 88); Muriqi (Asllani 77).
Slovenia: Oblak – Brekalo, Bijol, Drkusic; Elsnik; Stojanovic (Janza 71), Gnezda Cerin, Seslar (Horvat 71), Karnicnik; Gradisar (Vipotnik 63), Sesko.

Oct 10 – Stockholm
Sweden 0
Switzerland 2 (Xhaka 65 pen, Manzambi 90+4)
Sweden: Johansson – Lagerbielke, Hien, Gudmundsson; Bernhardsson (Holm 82), Bergvall (Bardghji 85), Karlstrom (Saletros 65), Ayari, Sema (Svensson 73); Gyokeres, Isak.
Switzerland: Kobel – Widmer (Jaquez 74), Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez; Freuler, Xhaka, Rieder (Sow 59); Vargas, Embolo, Ndoye (Manzambi 84).

Oct 13 – Gothenburg
Sweden 0
Kosovo 1 (Asllani 32)
Sweden: Johansson – Lagerbielke, Hien, Lindelof; Bernhardsson (Bardghji 46), Bergvall (Elanga 46), Ayari (Saletros 46), Svensson, Gudmundsson (Sema 82); Gyokeres, Isak.
Kosovo: Muric – I. Krasniqi, Hajrizi, Hajdari; Avdullahu; Vojvoda, Hodza (Emerllahu 71), Muslija (Jashari 66), Gallapeni; Asllani (Zhegrova 71), Muriqi (Al. Rrahmani 90).

Oct 13 – Ljubljana
Slovenia 0
Switzerland 0
Slovenia: Oblak – Karnicnik, Brekalo, Bijol, Drkusic, Janza (Seslar 88); Horvat (Vipotnik 70), Elsnik, Gnezda Cerin, Sturm (Stojanovic 57); Sesko.
Switzerland: Kobel – Widmer (Muheim 63), Elvedi, Akanji, Rodriguez (Bajrami 77); Freuler, Xhaka, Sow (Manzambi 62); Vargas (Rieder 77), Embolo, Ndoye.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Switzerland	4	3	1	0	9	0	10
Kosovo	4	2	1	1	3	4	7
Slovenia	4	0	3	1	2	5	3
Sweden	4	0	1	3	2	7	1

Standings before November's international window

Group C

Oct 9 – Zalaegerszeg
Belarus 0
Denmark 6 (Froholdt 14, Hojlund 19, 45, Dorgu 45+6, Dreyer 66, 78)
Belarus: Lapoukhov – Pigas (Kuchko 79), Kapilevich, Parkhomenko, Zabelin, Pechenin; Korzun, Kalinin (Yablonskiy 58), Ebong (Lisakovich 79); Melnichenko (Demchenko 46), Barkovskiy (Malashevich 72).
Denmark: Schmeichel – Christensen, Andersen (Hogsberg 46), Vestergaard; Isaksen (Dreyer 64), Hojbjerg, Hjulmand (Norgaard 64), Dorgu; Damsgaard, Froholdt (Eriksen 46); Hojlund (Wind 77).

Oct 9 – Glasgow
Scotland 3 (Christie 64, Ferguson 80, Dykes 90+3)
Greece 1 (Tsimikas 62)
Scotland: Gunn – Hickey (Ralston 58), Souttar, Hanley, Robertson (McKenna 90+2); Ferguson, Christie (Tierney 83); McGinn, McTominay, Gannon-Doak (Gilmour 59); Adams (Dykes 84).
Greece: Tzolakis – Vagiannidis, Mavropanos, Koulierakis, Tsimikas; Kourbelis (Mantalos 83), Zafeiris (Mouzakitis 83); Masouras (Ioannidis 72), Bakasetas (Konstantelias 72), Tzolis; Pavlidis (Karetsas 72).

Oct 12 – Glasgow
Scotland 2 (Adams 15, McTominay 84)
Belarus 1 (Kuchko 90+6)
Scotland: Gunn – Ralston (Tierney 72), Hendry (Souttar 72), McKenna, Robertson; McLean, Gilmour (Miller 88); Gannon-Doak (Bowie 90+1), McTominay, McGinn; Adams (Dykes 88).
Belarus: Lapoukhov – Pigas (Melnichenko 56), Martynovich, Parkhomenko (Demchenko 90+1), Zabelin; Malashevich (Kuchko 83), Ebong, Yablonskiy (Karpovich 90+1), Pechenin; Gromyko (Korzun 83); Barkovskiy.

Oct 12 – Copenhagen
Denmark 3 (Hojlund 21, Andersen 40, Damsgaard 41)
Greece 1 (Tzolis 63)
Denmark: Schmeichel – Christensen, Andersen, Vestergaard, Maehle; Isaksen (Dorgu 76), Hjulmand, Norgaard, Damsgaard (Eriksen 70); Froholdt (O'Riley 90+2), Hojlund (Biereth 70).
Greece: Vlachodimos – Rota, Mavropanos, Koulierakis, Tsimikas; Kourbelis (Pavlidis 64), Zafeiris; Karetsas (Konstantelias 64), Bakasetas (Masouras 64), Tzolis; Ioannidis (Siopsis 65).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Denmark	4	3	1	0	12	1	10
Scotland	4	3	1	0	7	2	10
Greece	4	1	0	3	7	10	3
Belarus	4	0	0	4	2	15	0

Standings before November's international window

Group D

Oct 10 – Reykjavik
Iceland 3 (Ellertsson 34, Gudmundsson 59, 75)
Ukraine 5 (Malinovskyi 14, 45+5, Hutsuliak 45, Kaliuzhnyi 85, Ocheretko 88)
Iceland: Olafsson – Palsson, Ingason, Gretarsson, Ellertsson (Anderson 86); Thorsteinsson (Hlynsson 69), Haraldsson, Johanesson (Thordarson 86), Gudmundsson; A. Gudjohnsen (Willumsson 86), Magnusson (Tomasson 69).
Ukraine: Trubin – Konoplya, Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Mykolenko; Kaliuzhnyi; Hutsuliak (Veleten 87), Malinovskyi (Bondarenko 87), Shaparenko (Ocheretko 70), Sudakov (Voloshyn 39); Vanat (Dovbyk 70).

Oct 10 – Paris
France 3 (Mbappe 45+2, Rabiot 69, Thauvin 84)
Azerbaijan 0
France: Maignan – Gusto, Saliba, Upamecano, T. Hernandez; Olise (Akliouche 70), Thuram, Rabiot (Camavinga 70), Coman (Nkunku 79); Ekitike (Mateta 79), Mbappe (Thauvin 83).
Azerbaijan: Mahammadaliyev – Aliyev (Mammadov 70), Badalov, Mustafazada, Krivotsyuk, Cafarquliyev; Bayramov (Dashdamirov 78), Mahmudov, Xaybulayev (Khachayev 78), Ahmadzada (Qurbanli 61); Emreli (Akhundzade 70).

Oct 13 – Krakow
Ukraine 2 (Hutsuliak 30, Malinovskyi 64)
Azerbaijan 1 (Mykolenko 45+3 og)
Ukraine: Trubin – Konoplya (Mykhaylychenko 46), Zabarnyi, Matviyenko, Mykolenko; Yarmoliuk (Bondar 84); Hutsuliak (Kaliuzhnyi 85), Malinovskyi (Shaparenko 71), Ocheretko (Bondarenko 71), Voloshyn; Dovbyk.
Azerbaijan: Mahammadaliyev – A. Huseynov (Aliyev 85), Badalov, Mustafazada, Krivotsyuk, Cafarquliyev; Bayramov (Ahmadzada 84), Mahmudov, Xaybulayev (Khachayev 90+2), Nuriyev (Qurbanli 61); Akhundzade (Emreli 85).

Oct 13 – Reykjavik
Iceland 2 (Palsson 39, Hlynsson 70)
France 2 (Nkunku 63, Mateta 68)
Iceland: Olafsson – Ellertsson, Palsson, Ingason, Gretarsson, Tomasson (Thorsteinsson 62); Haraldsson, Johanesson (Anderson 85), Gudmundsson (Thordarson 85); Magnusson (Willumsson 47), D. Gudjohnsen (Hlynsson 46).
France: Maignan – Kounde, Saliba, Upamecano, Digne; Kone, Camavinga (Thuram 75); Thauvin (Akliouche 64), Olise, Nkunku (Coman 74); Mateta (Ekitike 89).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
France	4	3	1	0	9	3	10
Ukraine	4	2	1	1	8	7	7
Iceland	4	1	1	2	11	9	4
Azerbaijan	4	0	1	3	2	11	1

Standings before November's international window

Group E

Oct 11 – Sofia
Bulgaria 1 (Kirilov 13)
Turkey 6 (Guler 11, Popov 49 og, Yildiz 51, 56, Celik 65, Kahveci 90+3)
Bulgaria: Mitov – Popov (Turitsov 63), Hristov, Bozhinov, Petrov; M. Petkov (Z. Dimitrov 63), Stoyanov, Kraev, Kirilov (L. Petkov 73); Chochev (Krastev 72); Despodov (Minchev 63).
Turkey: Cakir – Celik, Demiral (Akaydin 84), Bardakci, Kadioglu; Calhanoglu (Ozcan 63), Kokcu; Aydin, Guler (Uzun 69), Yildiz (Kahveci 63); Akturkoglu (Gul 84).

Oct 11 – Elche
Spain 2 (Yeremy 24, Oyarzabal 64)
Georgia 0
Spain: Simon – Porro (Llorente 75), Le Normand, Cubarsi, Cucurella; Merino, Zubimendi (Garcia 81), Pedri (Barrios 75); F. Torres, Oyarzabal (Iglesias 65), Yeremy (Baena 64).
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze (Azarovi 80), Goglichidze, Kashia, Dvali, Gocholeishvili; Kiteishvili (Gagnidze 69), Kochorashvili, Mekvabishvili (Mamuchashvili 86); Mikautadze (Kvernadze 69), Kvaratskhelia (Davitashvili 69).

Oct 14 – Valladolid
Spain 4 (Merino 35, 57, Chernev 79 og, Oyarzabal 90+2 pen)
Bulgaria 0
Spain: Simon – Porro, Le Normand (Vivian 71), Laporte, Grimaldo; Zubimendi (Garcia 63), Pedri (Barrios 68); Oyarzabal, Merino, Baena (Yeremy 63); Aghehowa (Iglesias 46).
Bulgaria: Vutsov – Georgiev, Hristov, Chernev, Velkovski; Minchev (M. Petkov 67), Gruev (Kraev 89), Shopov (Stoyanov 84), Krastev, Kirilov (Z. Dimitrov 67); Despodov (Nikolov 67).

Oct 14 – Izmit
Turkey 4 (Yildiz 14, Demiral 22, 52, Akgun 35)
Georgia 1 (Kochorashvili 64)
Turkey: Cakir – Muldur, Demiral, Bardakci, Elmali; Calhanoglu (Ozcan 77), Yuksek; Akgun (Alper Yilmaz 68), Guler (Kokcu 68), Yildiz (Kadioglu 83); Akturkoglu (Aydin 78).
Georgia: Mamardashvili – Kakabadze, Goglichidze, Lochoshvili, Gocholeishvili; Kochorashvili, Kiteishvili (Gagnidze 64), Mekvabishvili; Davitashvili (Lobjanidze 71), Mikautadze (Zivzivadze 46), Kvaratskhelia.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Spain	4	4	0	0	15	0	12
Turkey	4	3	0	1	13	10	9
Georgia	4	1	0	3	6	9	3
Bulgaria	4	0	0	4	1	16	0

Standings before November's international window

Group F

Oct 11 – Budapest
Hungary 2 (Lukacs 56, Gruber 90+4)
Armenia 0
Hungary: B. Toth – Nego, Orban, Szalai, Kerkez (Dardai 90); Schafer, Styles (Vitalis 75); Bolla (Osvath 75), A. Toth (Z. Nagy 63), Szoboszlai; Lukacs (Gruber 63).
Armenia Avagyan – Harutyunyan (Miranyan 86), S. Muradyan, Piloyan; Hovhannisyan, Iwu (K. Muradyan 79), Spertsyan, Tiknizyan; Bichakhchyan (Serobyan 59), Barseghyan (Ranos 79), Zelarayan (Shaghoyan 59).

Oct 11 – Lisbon
Portugal 1 (R. Neves 90+1)
Republic of Ireland 0
Portugal: Costa – Dalot (Trincao 62), Dias, Inacio (Veiga 46), Mendes; R. Neves, Vitinha (Semedo 61); Neto (Leao 61), Fernandes (Ramos 86), B. Silva; Ronaldo.
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – O'Brien, Collins, O'Shea; Coleman (Egan 86), Cullen, Molumby, Manning; Ebosele (Johnston 64), Ogbene (Smallbone 77); Ferguson (Parrott 78).

Oct 14 – Dublin
Republic of Ireland 1 (Ferguson 70)
Armenia 0
Republic of Ireland: Kelleher – O'Brien, Collins, O'Shea; Coleman (Ogbene 65), Smallbone (Taylor 81), Molumby, Manning; Ebosele (Parrott 65), Azaz; Ferguson (Idah 81).
Armenia Avagyan – Piloyan (Bichakhchyan 81), S. Muradyan, Mkrtchyan; Hovhannisyan, Iwu, Spertsyan, Tiknizyan (Grigoryan 71); Barseghyan, Ranos (Miranyan 71), Shaghoyan (Zelarayan 46). *Sent off: Barseghyan 52.*

Oct 14 – Lisbon
Portugal 2 (Ronaldo 22, 45+3)
Hungary 2 (Szalai 8, Szoboszlai 90+1)
Portugal: Costa – Semedo, Dias, Veiga, Mendes (Tavares 79); R. Neves (Palhinha 62), Vitinha; B. Silva, Fernandes (Conceicao 62), Neto (Felix 62); Ronaldo (Ramos 79).
Hungary: B. Toth – Nego, Orban, Szalai, Kerkez (Dardai 79); Szoboszlai, Styles (Vitalis 79), Schafer (A. Toth 38); Bolla (Lukacs 58), Varga, Sallai.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Portugal	4	3	1	0	11	4	10
Hungary	4	1	2	1	8	7	5
Rep of Ireland	4	1	1	2	4	5	4
Armenia	4	1	0	3	2	9	3

Standings before November's international window

Group G

Oct 9 – Helsinki
Finland 2 (Kallman 48, Markhiev 55)
Lithuania 1 (Sirvys 25)
Finland: Sinisalo – Alho, Koski, Ivanov, Lahteenmaki (Stahl 83); Markhiev (Lod 61), Kairinen, Walta (Peltola 83); Kallmann (Terho 65), Pohjanpalo, Antman (Keskinen 83).
Lithuania: Svedkauskas – Sirvys, Armalas (Sirgedas 77), Girdvainis, Tutyskinas, Lasickas; Golubickas (Slivka 60), Vorobjovas, Gineitis, Dolznikov (Jankauskas 60); Paulauskas (Petkevicius 77).

Oct 9 – Ta'Qali
Malta 0
Netherlands 4 (Gakpo 12 pen, 48 pen, Reijnders 57, Memphis 90+3)
Malta: Bonello – Corbalan, Shaw, Pepe, Camenzuli; Guillaumier, Satariano (Yankam 73); J. Mbong (Magri Overend 73), Teuma (Reid 84), Chouaref (Jones 84); Cardona (Tuma 87).

Netherlands: Verbruggen – Dumfries, Timber, Van Dijk, Van de Ven (Hartman 84); Gravenberch, Reijnders, De Jong (Kluivert 67); Frimpong (Malen 67), Weghorst (Memphis 67), Gakpo (Simons 84).

Oct 12 – Amsterdam
Netherlands 4 (Malen 8, Van Dijk 17, Memphis 38, Gakpo 84)
Finland 0
Netherlands: Verbruggen – Dumfries, Timber (Van Hecke 62), Van Dijk, Van de Ven (Ake 71); Gravenberch (Reijnders 46), De Jong; Malen (Simons 79), Kluivert, Gakpo; Memphis (Weghorst 62).
Finland: Joronen – Alho (Peltola 60), Stahl, Tenho, Koski, Lahteenmaki; Vaananen (Lod 60), Kairinen, Walta (Skytta 81); Keskinen (Pohjanpalo 69), Antman (Kallmann 70).

Oct 12 – Kaunas
Lithuania 0
Poland 2 (Szymanski 15, Lewandowski 64)
Lithuania: Svedkauskas – Sirvys, Armalas, Girdvainis (Paulauskas 85), Tutyskinas, Lasickas; Golubickas (Kalinauskas 66), Gineitis, Sirgedas (Vorobjovas 66), Slivka (Petkevicius 85); Cernych (Jankauskas 72).
Poland: Skorupski – Wisniewski (Ziolkowski 83), Bednarek, Kiwior; Cash (Wszolek 90), Zielinski, Slisz, Skoras (Kapustka 90); Szymanski (Swiderski 82), Lewandowski, Kaminski (Grosicki 90+4).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Netherlands	6	5	1	0	22	3	16
Poland	6	4	1	1	10	4	13
Finland	7	3	1	3	8	13	10
Lithuania	7	0	3	4	6	11	3
Malta	6	0	2	4	1	16	2

Standings before November's international window

Group H

Oct 9 – Vienna
Austria 10 (Schmid 7, Arnautovic 8, 47, 83, 84, Gregoritsch 24, Posch 30, 42, Laimer 45, Wurmbrand 76)
San Marino 0
Austria: Pentz – Posch (Wurmbrand 72), Danso, Alaba (Friedl 63), Prass; Laimer, Seiwald (Schopf 77); Schmid, Gregoritsch (Florucz 63), Sabitzer (Grillitsch 72); Arnautovic.
San Marino: Colombo – Matteoni (Sammaritani 81), Cevoli, Valentini, Tosi; Contadini (G. Capicchioni 74), Zannoni (Mularoni 67), L. Capicchioni, Lazzari (Casadei 46), Berardi (Vitaioli 67); Nanni.

Oct 9 – Larnaca
Cyprus 2 (Laifis 45+1, Pittas 90+6 pen)
Bosnia & Herz 2 (Katic 10, Michael 36 og)
Cyprus: Michael – Shikkis, S. Andreou, Laifis, A. Correia (Pileas 65); Artymatas (Kyriakou 80), Kastanos; Loizou (Koutsakos 80), Charalampous (Kakoullis 72), Tzionis (E. Andreou 80); Pittas.
Bosnia-Herz: Vasilj – Dedic, Katic, Muharemovic, Mujakic (Burnic 46); Sunjic, Tahirovic (Besirovic 90); Memic (Omerovic 83), Gigovic (Basic 65), Alajbegovic (Bajraktarevic 65); Dzeko.

Oct 12 – Bucharest
Romania 1 (Ghita 90+5)
Austria 0
Romania: Radu – Ratiu, Popescu (Ghita 72), Burca, Chipciu; Dragomir, M. Marin, Hagi; Man, Birligea (Munteanu 88), Mihaila.
Austria: A. Schlager – Posch, Lienhart, Alaba, Mwene (Prass 65); Seiwald, Laimer; Schmid (Schopf 86), Baumgartner (Grillitsch 65), Sabitzer; Gregoritsch (Florucz 86).

Oct 12 – Serravalle
San Marino 0
Cyprus 4 (Loizou 9, S. Andreou 59, Kastanos 67 pen, Kakoullis 79)
San Marino: Colombo – Sammaritani (Matteoni 46), Cevoli (Valentini 77), Rossi, Ricardi; Golinucci, L. Capicchioni (Casadei 61), Zannoni; Contadini (Berardi 9), Lazzari (Sensoni 62); Nanni.
Cyprus: Mall – Shikkis, S. Andreou, Laifis, Pileas (A. Correia 64); Artymatas (Kyriakou 54), Kastanos (Koutsakos 73); Loizou, Charalampous (Kyprianou 64), Tzionis; Pittas (Kakoullis 63).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Austria	6	5	0	1	19	3	15
Bosnia-Herz	6	4	1	1	13	5	13
Romania	6	3	1	2	11	6	10
Cyprus	7	2	2	3	11	9	8
San Marino	7	0	0	7	1	32	0

Standings before November's international window

Group I

Oct 11 – Oslo
Norway 5 (Khalaili 18 og, Haaland 27, 63, 72, Nachmias 28 og)
Israel 0
Norway: Nyland – Ryerson, Ajer, Heggem, Moller Wolfe (Bjorkan 76); Bobb (Donnum 77), Berge, Berg (Aasgaard 76), Nusa (Schjelderup 85); Sorloth (Strand Larsen 76), Haaland.
Israel: Dan Peretz – Dasa (Mizrahi 71), Blorian, Nachimas (Baltaxa 31), Revivo; Khalaili, Abu Fani (Noy 46), E. Peretz, Solomon; Biton (Baribo 71), Gloukh (Turgeman 87).

Oct 11 – Tallinn
Estonia 1 (Sappinen 76)
Italy 3 (Kean 4, Retegui 38, Esposito 74)
Estonia: Hein – Peetson, Paskotsi, Kuusk (Mets 62), Saliste (Sinyavskiy 46); Palumets (Schjonning-Larsen 46), Soomets; Kait, Shein (Mustmaa 83), Saarma; A. Tamm (Sappinen 62).
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Bastoni, Calafiori; Orsolini (Cambiaso 62), Barella (Frattesi 78), Tonali, Dimarco; Kean (Esposito 15), Raspadori (Spinazzola 62); Retegui (Cristante 78).

Oct 14 – Udine
Italy 3 (Retegui 45+2 pen, 74, Mancini 90+3)
Israel 0
Italy: Donnarumma – Di Lorenzo, Mancini, Calafiori; Cambiaso (Spinazzola 85), Barella, Locatelli (Cristante 86), Tonali (Piccoli 90+3), Dimarco; Raspadori (Esposito 46), Retegui (Cambiaghi 90+2).
Israel: Glazer – Dasa (Mizrahi 89), Blorian, Baltaxa, Revivo; Biton, E. Peretz (Abu Fani 75), Gloukh; Khalaili (Turiel 73), Baribo (Turgeman 72), Solomon (Shua 89).

Oct 14 – Tallinn
Estonia 1 (Kait 12)
Moldova 1 (Bodisteanu 64)
Estonia: Hein – Schjonning-Larsen, Paskotsi, Mets, Sinyavskiy; Yakovlev, Soomets, Kait (Paalberg 85), Saarma (Mustmaa 59); Kristal (Shein 59); Sappinen (A. Tamm 82).
Moldova: Kozhukhar – Forov (Plastica 81), Craciun (Stefan 62), Baboglo, Gherasimencov, Reabciuk; Caimacov (Bodisteanu 46), Rata (Bors 62), Bogaciuc (Lupan 46); Perciun, Postolachi.

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Norway	6	6	0	0	29	3	18
Italy	6	5	0	1	18	8	15
Israel	7	3	0	4	15	19	9
Estonia	7	1	1	5	7	17	4
Moldova	6	0	1	5	4	26	0

Standings before November's international window

Group J

Oct 10 – Astana
Kazakhstan 4 (Kenzhebek 26, 59, Zainutdinov 28, Kasym 81)
Liechtenstein 0
Kazakhstan: Seysen – Kairov, Kasym, Alip (Zhumakhanov 82), Vorogovskiy (Zhagorov 75); Zaynutdinov (Karaman 62), Kuat; Samorodov, Orazov (Zhukov 75), Kenzhebek (Sviridov 62); Chesnokov.
Liechtenstein: Buchel – Schlegel (Weissenhofer 70), Hofer, Doppel; N. Hasler, Sele (Meier 70), Luchinger, A. Hasler (S. Wolfinger 60), Zund; Luque-Notaro (Salanovic 90), Kindle (Saglam 46).

Oct 10 – Gent
Belgium 0
North Macedonia 0
Belgium: Courtois – Castagne (Meunier 89), Debast, Theate, De Cuyper (Seys 89); Raskin; Saelemaekers (Openda 59), Vanaken (Onana 74), De Bruyne, Doku; Trossard (Fofana 74).
North Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Ashkovski (Churlinov 46), Stojchevski (Despotovski 75), Zajkov, Musliu (Velkovski 84), Alioski; Kostadinov, Atanasov (Alimi 74), Elmas; Bardhi, Miovski (Ristovski 57).

Oct 13 – Skopje
North Macedonia 1 (Bardhi 74)
Kazakhstan 1 (Karaman 54)
N. Macedonia: Dimitrievski – Ilievski, Stojchevski (Serafimov 75), Velkovski (Kostadinov 46), Zajkov, Alioski; Alimi (Trajkovski 75), Bardhi, Elmas; Miovski (Churlinov 46), Ristovski (Rastoder 62).
Kazakhstan: Seysen – Kairov, Kasym, Alip, Vorogovskiy (Zhagorov 86); Zaynutdinov (Kasabulat 86), Kuat, Karaman (Khalmatov 70); Chesnokov, Sviridov (Shushenachev 62), Kenzhebek (Zhumat 62).

Oct 13 – Cardiff
Wales 2 (Rodon 8, Broadhead 89)
Belgium 4 (De Bruyne 18 pen, 76 pen, Meunier 24, Trossard 90)
Wales: Darlow – Williams, Rodon, Cabango, B. Davies (Broadhead 71); Ampadu, J. James (Moore 86); Brooks (Johnson 58), Wilson, Thomas; Harris (Dasilva 86).
Belgium: Courtois – Meunier, Debast, Theate (Mechele 81), De Cuyper (Castagne 60); Onana (Vanaken 70), Raskin; Doku, De Bruyne (Witsel 81), Trossard; De Ketelaere (Fofana 81).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Belgium	6	4	2	0	21	6	14
N. Macedonia	7	3	4	0	12	3	13
Wales	6	3	1	2	13	10	10
Kazakhstan	7	2	1	4	8	12	7
Liechtenstein	6	0	0	6	0	23	0

Standings before November's international window

Group K

Oct 11 – Riga
Latvia 2 (Zelenkovs 41, Gutkovskis 55 pen)
Andorra 2 (San Nicolas 33, Olivera 78)
Latvia: Zviedris – Savalnieks (Daskevics 87), Jurkovskis (Veips 46), Cernomordijs, Balodis, Ciganiks; Varslavans, Zelenkovs (Pulis 87), Saveljevs (Vapne 46); Gutkovskis, Sits (Ikaunieks 46).
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra (Cucu 75), Llovera, C. Garcia, Olivera, San Nicolas; Rodrigo (Dacu 87), M. Vales (Teixeira 69), Guillen, Cervos; Berto (Lopez 59). *Sent off: Guillen 90+2.*

Oct 11 – Leskovac
Serbia 0
Albania 1 (Manaj 45+1)
Serbia: Petrovic – Milosavljevic, Veljkovic, Pavlovic; Zivkovic (S. Mitrovic 63), Stankovic (Ilic 84), N. Maksimovic (Zukic 75), Kostic; Samardzic (Kostov 75); Vlahovic, A. Mitrovic (Jovic 63).
Albania: Strakosha – Hysaj, Ajeti, Djimsiti, Mitaj; Laci (Bajrami 78), Shehu, Asllani; Broja (Hoxha 63), Manaj (Daku 78), Uzuni (Mihaj 90+3).

Oct 14 – Encamp
Andorra 1 (Lopez 17)
Serbia 3 (C. Garcia 19 og, Vlahovic 54, A. Mitrovic 77 pen)
Andorra: Alvarez – Borra (Rubio 85), Llovera, C. Garcia, Olivera (M. Garcia 78), San Nicolas; Rodrigo (Dacu 85), E. Vales (M. Vales 63), Babot, Cervos; Lopez (Berto 63).
Serbia: Petrovic – Erakovic, Pavlovic (Simic 84), Veljkovic (Milosavljevic 46); Gudelj (N. Maksimovic 68); S. Mitrovic, Samardzic (Cvetkovic 84), Stankovic (Ugresic 89), Kostic; Vlahovic, A. Mitrovic.

Oct 14 – Riga
Latvia 0
England 5 (Gordon 26, Kane 44, 45+3 pen, Tonisevs 58 og, Eze 86)
Latvia: Zviedris – Jurkovskis (Tonisevs 46), Veips, Cernomordijs, Balodis, Ciganiks; Varslavans (Daskevics 66), Vapne (Saveljevs 73), Zelenkovs, Ikaunieks (Grabovskis 88); Gutkovskis (Regza 73).
England: Pickford – Spence, Konsa, Stones (Burn 71), Lewis-Skelly; Rogers (Eze 60), Anderson, Rice (J. Henderson 60); Saka (Bowen 60), Kane, Gordon (Rashford 71).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
England (Q)	6	6	0	0	18	0	18
Albania	6	3	2	1	6	3	11
Serbia	6	3	1	2	7	7	10
Latvia	7	1	2	4	4	13	5
Andorra	7	0	1	6	3	15	1

Standings before November's international window

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Group L

Oct 9 – Prague
Czech Republic 0
Croatia 0
Czech Republic: Kovar – Coufal, Vitik, Krejci, Zeleny; Cerv, Soucek; Provod (Cerny 76), Sulc (Lingr 76), Kusej (Vydra 62); Chory.
Croatia: Livakovic – Jakic, Sutalo, Caleta-Car, Gvardiol; Modric, P. Sucic; Mario Pasalic (Ivanovic 62), Kramaric, Perisic (Fruk 78); Budimir (Marco Pasalic 62).

Oct 9 – Torshavn
Faroe Islands 4 (Sorensen 16, 55, Roganovic 36 og, Frederiksberg 72 pen)
Montenegro 0
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge – Danielsen (Benjaminsen 82), Faero, G. Vatnhamar, A. Edmundsson, Agnarsson; Fredriksberg (Knudsen 76), Hendriksson (Turi 68), Andreasen, Sorensen (Justinussen 77); Olsen (J. Edmundsson 68).
Montenegro: Nikic – Roganovic (Camaj 66), Sipcic, Savic, Vukcevic, Perovic (Dukanovic 59); Adzic (Bajovic 66), Bakic, Simun; Osmajic (Kostic 82), Krstovic.

Oct 12 – Varazdin
Croatia 3 (Fruk 30, L. Sucic 78, Erlic 90+6)
Gibraltar 0
Croatia: Kotarski – Marco Pasalic, Pongracic (Gvardiol 60), Erlic, Bradaric; Moro (L. Sucic 46), Kovacic (Modric 69); Majer, Baturina (Perisic 69), Fruk; Ivanovic (Kramaric 69).
Gibraltar: Hankins – Jolley, Ronan, Lopes, Annesley (Mouelhi 88), Valarino; Scanlon (Jessop 90+3), Bent, Perera (Clinton 67), Richards; De Barr (Del Rio 90+3).

Oct 12 – Torshavn
Faroe Islands 2 (Sorensen 67, Agnarsson 81)
Czech Republic 1 (Karabec 78)
Faroe Islands: Lamhauge – Faero, G. Vatnhamar, A. Edmundsson; Danielsen, Hendriksson (Andreasen 55), Turi (Mneney 85), Davidsen; Fredriksberg (Bjartalid 80), J. Edmundsson (Olsen 55), Sorensen (Agnarsson 80).
Czech Republic: Kovar – Coufal, Vitik, Krejci, Jemelka; Cerv (Beran 60), Soucek; Cerny (Chramosta 87), Sulc (Provod 70), Kusej (Karabec 46); Vydra (Chory 46).

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Croatia	6	5	1	0	20	1	16
Czech Rep	7	4	1	2	12	8	13
Faroe Islands	7	4	0	3	10	6	12
Montenegro	6	2	0	4	4	13	6
Gibraltar	6	0	0	6	2	20	0

Standings before November's international window

AFRICA Section

● *9 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Group A

Oct 8 – Kigali
Ethiopia 1 (James 27)
Guinea-Bissau 0

Oct 8 – Casablanca
Djibouti 0
Egypt 3 (Adel 8, Salah 14, 84)

Oct 8 – Paynesville
Sierra Leone 0
Burkina Faso 1 (Zougrana 42)

Oct 12 – Ouagadougou
Burkina Faso 3 (P. Kabore 65, 82, 90+6)
Ethiopia 1 (Biniam 84)

Oct 12 – Casablanca
Djibouti 1 (Farah 29)
Sierra Leone 2 (Bah 45+2, Tarawallie 72)

Oct 12 – Cairo
Egypt 1 (Hamdy 10)
Guinea-Bissau 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Egypt (Q)	10	8	2	0	20	2	26
Burkina Faso	10	6	3	1	23	8	21
Sierra Leone	10	4	3	3	12	10	15
Guinea-Bissau	10	2	4	4	8	10	10
Ethiopia	10	2	3	5	9	14	9
Djibouti	10	0	1	9	5	33	1

Group B

Oct 10 – Juba
South Sudan 0
Senegal 5 (I. Sarr 29, 54, Mane 46, Jackson 60 pen, Ndiaye 75)

Oct 10 – Lome
Togo 0
DR Congo 1 (Bakambu 7)

Oct 10 – Dar es Salaam
Sudan 0
Mauritania 0

Oct 13 – Juba
South Sudan 0
Togo 0

Oct 14 – Kinshasa
DR Congo 1 (Bongonda 29)
Sudan 0

Oct 14 – Diamniadio
Senegal 4 (Mane 45+1, 48, Ndiaye 64, Diallo 85)
Mauritania 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Senegal (Q)	10	7	3	0	22	3	24
DR Congo*	10	7	1	2	15	6	22
Sudan	10	3	4	3	8	6	13
Togo	10	1	5	4	5	10	8
Mauritania	10	1	4	5	4	13	7
South Sudan	10	0	5	5	3	19	5

*Advance to play-offs as a best runner-up

Group C

Oct 10 – Kigali
Rwanda 0
Benin 1 (Aiyegun 80)

Oct 10 – Polokwane
Lesotho 1 (Kalake 83)
Nigeria 2 (Troost-Ekong 55 pen, Adams 80)

Oct 10 – Durban
Zimbabwe 0
South Africa 0

Oct 13 – Polokwane
Lesotho 1 (Kalake 90+3)
Zimbabwe 0

Oct 14 – Mbombela
South Africa 3 (Mbatha 5, Appollis 26, Makgopa 72)
Rwanda 0

Oct 14 – Uyo
Nigeria 4 (Osimhen 3, 37, 51, Onyeka 90+1)
Benin 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
South Africa (Q)	10	5	3	2	15	9	18
Nigeria*	10	4	5	1	15	8	17
Benin	10	5	2	3	12	11	17
Lesotho	10	3	3	4	9	12	12
Rwanda	10	3	2	5	5	9	8
Zimbabwe	10	0	5	5	5	12	5

*Advance to play-offs as a best runner-up

Group D

Oct 8 – Saint Pierre
Mauritius 0
Cameroon 2 (Ngamaleu 57, Mbeumo 90+2)

Oct 8 – Tripoli
Libya 3 (Lopes 1 og, El Maremi 42, Al Shalui 58)
Cape Verde 3 (Arcanjo 29, Cabral 76, W. Semedo 82)

Oct 8 – Lobamba
Eswatini 2 (Figueireido 48, 54)
Angola 2 (Buatu 69, Papel 80)

Oct 13 – Saint Pierre
Mauritius 0
Libya 0

Oct 13 – Yaounde
Cameroon 0
Angola 0

Oct 13 – Praia
Cape Verde 3 (Livramento 48, W. Semedo 54, Stopira 90+1)
Eswatini 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Cape Verde (Q)	10	7	2	1	16	8	23
Cameroon*	10	5	4	1	17	5	19
Libya	10	4	4	2	12	10	16
Angola	10	2	6	2	9	8	12
Mauritius	10	1	3	6	7	17	6
Eswatini	10	0	3	7	6	19	3

*Advance to play-offs as a best runner-up

Group E

Oct 8 – Ouagadougou
Niger 3 (Sosah 45+2, Oumarou 49, Adebayor 67)
Congo 1 (Bassinga 90+4)

Oct 8 – Zanzibar City
Tanzania 0
Zambia 1 (F. Sakala 75)

Oct 12 – Ndola
Zambia 0
Niger 1 (Sosah 56)

Oct 14 – Rabat
Morocco 1 (En-Nesyri 63)
Congo 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Morocco (Q)	8	8	0	0	22	2	24
Niger	8	5	0	3	11	10	15
Tanzania	8	3	1	4	6	7	10
Zambia	8	3	0	5	10	10	9
Congo	8	0	1	7	4	24	1
Eritrea*	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

*Withdrew

Group F

Oct 9 – Bujumbura
Burundi 0
Kenya 1 (Ogam 72)

Oct 10 – Saint Pierre
Seychelles 0
Ivory Coast 7 (Sangare 7 pen, Agbadou 17, Diakite 32, Guessand 39, Diomande 55, Adingra 67, Kessie 90)

Oct 10 – Nairobi
Gambia 3 (Minteh 23, Sidibeh 45+2, 47)
Gabon 4 (Aubameyang 20, 42, 62, 76)

Oct 14 – Saint Pierre
Seychelles 0
Gambia 7 (Sidibeh 2, 46, Manneh 24, 67, 75, Barrow 47, 52)

Oct 14 – Franceville
Gabon 2 (Meyo 86, Lemina 90+1)
Burundi 0

Oct 14 – Abidjan
Ivory Coast 3 (Kessie 7, Diomande 54, Diallo 84)
Kenya 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ivory Coast (Q)	10	8	2	0	25	0	26
Gabon*	10	8	1	1	22	9	25
Gambia	10	4	1	5	27	18	13
Kenya	10	3	3	4	18	14	12
Burundi	10	3	1	6	13	13	10
Seychelles	10	0	0	10	2	53	0

*Advance to play-offs as a best runner-up

Group G

Oct 9 – Oran
Somalia 0
Algeria 3 (Amoura 7, 57, Mahrez 19)

Oct 9 – Maputo
Mozambique 1 (Reinildo 19)
Guinea 2 (Traore 2, 59)

Oct 9 – Francistown
Botswana 0
Uganda 1 (Ssemugabi 54)

Oct 14 – Casablanca
Guinea 2 (Traore 18, Balde 35)
Botswana 2 (Boy 7, Mohutsiwa 45+2)

Oct 14 – Oran
Somalia 0
Mozambique 1 (Catamo 6)

Oct 14 – Tizi Ouzou
Algeria 2 (Amoura 81 pen, 90+9 pen)
Uganda 1 (Mukwala 6)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Algeria (Q)	10	8	1	1	24	8	25
Uganda	10	6	0	4	14	9	18
Mozambique	10	6	0	4	14	17	18
Guinea	10	4	3	3	11	8	15
Botswana	10	3	1	6	12	16	10
Somalia	10	0	1	9	3	20	1

Group H

Oct 9 – Lilongwe
Malawi 3*
Equatorial Guinea 0
*Awarded

Oct 9 – Paynesville
Liberia 3 (Kosiah 3 pen, Mamadu Bah 9, Ledlum 81)
Namibia 1 (Ndeunyema 87)

Oct 10 – Tunis
Sao Tome & Principe 0
Tunisia 5 (Chaouat 36, Saad 39, 43, Gharbi 47, Ben Romdhane 68 pen, 90)

Oct 13 – Malabo
Equatorial Guinea 1 (Bikoro 14)
Liberia 1 (Andrews 27)

Oct 13 – Sousse
Sao Tome & Principe 1 (Afonso 62 pen)
Malawi 0

Oct 13 – Tunis
Tunisia 3 (Abdi 28 pen, Mejbri 55, Sassi 64)
Namibia 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Tunisia (Q)	10	9	1	0	22	0	28
Namibia	10	4	3	3	13	10	15
Liberia	10	4	3	3	13	11	15
Malawi	10	4	1	5	11	10	13
Eq. Guinea	10	3	2	5	8	15	11
Sao Tome & P.	10	1	0	9	5	26	3

Group I

Oct 8 – N'Djamena
Chad 0
Mali 2 (K. Doumbia 19, 74)

Oct 8 – El Jadida
Central African Republic 0
Ghana 5 (Salisu 20, Partey 52, Djiku 69, J. Ayew 71, K. Sulemana 87)

Oct 8 – Abidjan
Comoros 1 (Said 81)
Madagascar 2 (Couturier 11, Raheriniaina 73)

Oct 12 – N'Djamena
Chad 2 (Ecua 53, Mouandilmadji 87)
Central African Republic 3 (Mokonou 3, Baboula 31, Namnganda 90+3)

Oct 12 – Accra
Ghana 1 (Kudus 47)
Comoros 0

Oct 12 – Bamako
Mali 4 (Sinayoko 10, 64, Nene 39, G. Diarra 90+5)
Madagascar 1 (N'Zi 90)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Ghana (Q)	10	8	1	1	23	6	25
Madagascar	10	6	1	3	17	12	19
Mali	10	5	3	2	17	6	18
Comoros	10	5	0	5	12	13	15
Central African Rep	10	2	2	6	11	24	8
Chad	10	0	1	9	5	24	1

CONCACAF Section

● *3 direct slots available, plus 2 play-off slots (along with 3 host nations)*

Third Round

Group A

Oct 10 – Paramaribo
Suriname 1 (Misidjan 90+4)
Guatemala 1 (Lom 75)

Oct 10 – San Salvador
El Salvador 0
Panama 1 (Fajardo 55)

Oct 14 – Panama City
Panama 1 (Diaz 90+6)
Suriname 1 (Margaret 21)

Oct 14 – San Salvador
El Salvador 0
Guatemala 1 (Santis 46)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Suriname	4	1	3	0	4	3	6
Panama	4	1	3	0	3	2	6
Guatemala	4	1	2	1	3	3	5
El Salvador	4	1	0	3	2	4	3

Standings before November's international window

Group B

Oct 10 – Devonshire Parish
Bermuda 0
Trinidad & Tobago 3 (Sealy 10, Spicer 30, Henry 49)

Oct 10 – Willemstad
Curacao 2 (Comenencia 14, Gorre 68)
Jamaica 0

Oct 14 – Willemstad
Curacao 1 (Gorre 19)
Trinidad & Tobago 1 (Spicer 58)

Oct 14 – Kingston
Jamaica 4 (Leverock 24 og, De Cordova-Reid 26, Nicholson 35, Richards 76)
Bermuda 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Jamaica	4	3	0	1	10	2	9
Curacao	4	2	2	0	6	3	8
Trinidad & Tob.	4	1	2	1	4	3	5
Bermuda	4	0	0	4	2	14	0

Standings before November's international window

Group C

Oct 9 – Managua
Nicaragua 0
Haiti 3 (Nazon 12, Jean Jacques 35, Louicius 90+2)

Oct 9 – San Pedro Sula
Honduras 0
Costa Rica 0

Oct 13 – Tegucigalpa
Honduras 3 (Rivas 18, Lozano 26, Quioto 40)
Haiti 0

Oct 13 – San Jose
Costa Rica 4 (Martinez 12, 28, Ugalde 49, Calvo 90+4)
Nicaragua 1 (Arteaga 26)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Honduras	4	2	2	0	5	0	8
Costa Rica	4	1	3	0	8	5	6
Haiti	4	1	2	1	6	6	5
Nicaragua	4	0	1	3	2	10	1

Standings before November's international window

ASIA Section

● *8 direct slots available, plus 1 play-off slot*

Fourth Round

Group A

Oct 8 – Al Rayyan
Oman 0
Qatar 0

Oct 11 – Al Rayyan
United Arab Emirates 2 (Meloni 76, Caio 83)
Oman 1 (Autonne 12 og)

Oct 14 – Al Rayyan
Qatar 2 (Khoukhi 49, Miguel 74)
United Arab Emirates 1 (Adil 90+8)

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Qatar (Q)	2	1	1	0	2	1	4
UAE*	2	1	0	1	3	3	3
Oman	2	0	1	1	1	2	1

**Advance to fifth round*

Group B

Oct 8 – Jeddah
Indonesia 2 (Diks 11 pen, 88 pen)
Saudi Arabia 3 (Abu Al Shamat 17, Al Buraikan 36 pen, 62)

Oct 11 – Jeddah
Iraq 1 (Iqbal 76)
Indonesia 0

Oct 14 – Jeddah
Saudi Arabia 0
Iraq 0

Final Standings

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Saudi Arabia (Q)	2	1	1	0	3	2	4
Iraq*	2	1	1	0	1	0	4
Indonesia	2	0	0	2	2	4	0

**Advance to fifth round*

2027 ASIAN CUP QUALIFYING

Third Round

Group A

Oct 9 – Darwin
Timor-Leste 1 (Freitas 47)
Philippines 4 (Kristensen 15, 31, 49, 56)

Oct 9 – Hisor
Tajikistan 2 (Samiev 8, Mabatshoyev 30)
Maldives 0

Oct 14 – Capas
Philippines 3 (J. Tabinas 46, Kristensen 70, Gayoso 90+1)
Timor-Leste 1 (Rangel 45+1)

Oct 14 – Male
Maldives 0
Tajikistan 3 (Safarov 4, Mabatshoyev 34, 78)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Philippines	4	3	1	0	13	5	10
Tajikistan	4	3	1	0	8	2	10
Timor-Leste	4	1	0	3	3	8	3
Maldives	4	0	0	4	1	10	0

Standings before November's international window

Group B

Oct 9 – Bandar Seri Begawan
Brunei 0
Yemen 2 (Al Matari 24, Al Gahwashi 36)

Oct 9 – Doha
Lebanon 2 (Shour 63, Ayoub 90+4)
Bhutan 0

Oct 14 – Al Wakrah
Bhutan 0
Lebanon 4 (Fakhro 9, Chakroun 16, Safwan 20, Farran 50)

Oct 14 – Kuwait City
Yemen 9 (Al Gahwashi 12, 27, 51, 54, 73, Al Dahi 29, 65, Masnom 62, Sabara 90+1)
Brunei 0

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Lebanon	4	3	1	0	11	0	10
Yemen	4	2	2	0	11	0	8
Brunei	4	1	0	3	2	17	3
Bhutan	4	0	1	3	1	8	1

Standings before November's international window

Group C

Oct 9 – Kallang
Singapore 1 (Ikhsan 45+1)
India 1 (Rahim 90)

Oct 9 – Dhaka
Bangladesh 3 (Choudhury 13, Morsalin 84, Shome 90+9)
Hong Kong 4 (Everton 45+4, Merkies 50, 75, 90+11)

Oct 14 – Kowloon
Hong Kong 1 (Orr 36 pen)
Bangladesh 1 (Rakib 84)

Oct 14 – Margao
India 1 (Chhangte 14)
Singapore 2 (Song Ui-young 44, 58)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Hong Kong	4	2	2	0	6	4	8
Singapore	4	2	2	0	5	3	8
Bangladesh	4	0	2	2	5	7	2
India	4	0	2	2	2	4	2

Standings before November's international window

Group D

Oct 9 – Colombo
Sri Lanka 1 (Perera 67)
Turkmenistan 0

Oct 9 – Bangkok
Thailand 2 (Seksan 51, Chanathip 78)
Chinese Taipei 0

Oct 14 – Taipei
Chinese Taipei 1 (Kuo Po-wei 46)
Thailand 6 (Teerasak 4, 62, 76, Seksan 25, Supachok 45+1, Huang Tzu-ming 90+3 og)

Oct 14 – Arkadag
Turkmenistan 2 (Tagayew 52, Saparow 57)
Sri Lanka 1 (Annagulyyew 65 og)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Turkmenistan	4	3	0	1	7	4	9
Thailand	4	3	0	1	10	4	9
Sri Lanka	4	2	0	2	5	4	6
Chinese Taipei	4	0	0	4	3	13	0

Standings before November's international window

Group E

Oct 9 – Islamabad
Pakistan 0
Afghanistan 0

Oct 9 – Hofuf
Syria 5 (Khribin 6, 19, 71 pen, Alsalkhadi 29, Al Hallaq 89)
Myanmar 1 (Nanda Kyaw 90+1)

Oct 14 – Yangon
Myanmar 0
Syria 3 (Sabbag 79, 85, Alsalkhadi 87)

Oct 14 – Farwaniya
Afghanistan 1 (Hanifi 5)
Pakistan 1 (Hussain 29)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Syria	4	4	0	0	11	1	12
Myanmar	4	2	0	2	4	9	6
Afghanistan	4	0	2	2	2	4	2
Pakistan	4	0	2	2	1	4	2

Standings before November's international window

Group F

Oct 9 – Vientiane
Laos 0
Malaysia 3 (Arif 53, Cools 69, Faisal 90+7)

Oct 9 – Ho Chi Minh City
Vietnam 3 (Nguyen Tien Linh 9, Pham Xuan Manh 67, Nguyen Van Vi 72)
Nepal 1 (Sanish 17)

Oct 14 – Ho Chi Minh City
Nepal 0
Vietnam 1 (Shrestha 5 og)

Oct 14 – Kuala Lumpur
Malaysia 5 (Faisal 59, Morales 65, 70, Khammanh 79 og, Josue 82)
Laos 1 (Chanthavixay 19)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Malaysia	4	4	0	0	14	1	12
Vietnam	4	3	0	1	9	5	9
Laos	4	1	0	3	3	14	3
Nepal	4	0	0	4	2	8	0

Standings before November's international window

FRIENDLIES

Oct 4 – Basseterre
St Kitts & Nevis 5 (Lewis 10, Matthew 26, 41, Browne 29, Hamilton 38)
Saint Martin 0

Oct 5 – Basseterre
St Kitts & Nevis 2 (Hamilton 53, Eddy 90)
Saint Martin 1 (C. Clerveau 79)

Oct 6 – Kingstown
St Vincent & Grenadines 7 (Anderson 14, Pierre 29, C. Stewart 44, Leigertwood 74, 90+1, Solomon 89, M. Stewart 90+4)
Cuba 0

Oct 8 – Europa Point
Gibraltar 0
New Caledonia 2 (Katrawa 61, Haewegene 90+5)

Oct 8 – St George's
Grenada 4 (Hippolyte 10, 39, Phillip 76, 90+3)
British Virgin Islands 1 (Forbes 73)

Oct 9 – Bucharest
Romania 2 (Munteanu 12, Hagi 44)
Moldova 1 (Radu 38 og)

Oct 9 – Wembley
England 3 (Rogers 3, Watkins 11, Saka 20)
Wales 0

Oct 9 – Chorzow
Poland 1 (Zielinski 49)
New Zealand 0

Oct 9 – Rabat
Morocco 1 (El Yamiq 90+4)
Bahrain 0

Oct 9 – Kingstown
St Vincent & Grenadines 1 (Anderson 75)
Cuba 0

Oct 9 – Tashkent
Uzbekistan 2 (Shomurodov 10, Erkinov 19)
Kuwait 0

Oct 10 – Suita
Japan 2 (Ogawa 26, Ueda 90+4)
Paraguay 2 (Almiron 20, D. Gomez 64)

Oct 10 – Seoul
South Korea 0
Brazil 5 (Estevao 13, 47, Rodrygo 41, 49, Vinicius Junior 77)

Oct 10 – Kuala Lumpur
Uruguay 1 (Laquintana 60)
Dominican Republic 0

Oct 10 – Istanbul
Jordan 0
Bolivia 1 (Robson Matheus 90)

Oct 10 – Volgograd
Russia 2 (Vorobyev 22, Batrakov 70)
Iran 1 (Hosseinzadeh 48)

Oct 11 – Santiago
Chile 2 (Brereton Diaz 63, Gutierrez 90+4)
Peru 1 (Inga 40)

Oct 11 – Montreal
Canada 0
Australia 1 (Irankunda 71)

Oct 11 – Miami
Argentina 1 (Lo Celso 31)
Venezuela 0

Oct 11 – Austin
United States 1 (Balogun 71)
Ecuador 1 (Valencia 24)

Oct 12 – Arlington
Mexico 0
Colombia 4 (Lucumi 16, Diaz 56, Lerma 64, Carbonero 87)

Oct 12 – Ta'Qali
Malta 1 (P. Mbong 60 pen)
Bosnia & Herzegovina 4 (Memic 16, Tabakovic 53, Tahirovic 84, Omerovic 86)

Oct 12 – St George's
Grenada 2 (Wright-Phillips 8, John-Brown 42)
Cuba 0

Oct 13 – Malacca City
Uzbekistan 1 (Jiyanov 82)
Uruguay 2 (Torres 51, Sanabria 60)

Oct 13 – Podgorica
Montenegro 2 (Osmajic 74, Dukanovic 87)
Liechtenstein 1 (Sele 27)

Oct 14 – Tokyo
Japan 3 (Minamino 52, Nakamura 62, Ueda 71)
Brazil 2 (Paulo Henrique 26, Martinelli 32)

Oct 14 – Seoul
South Korea 2 (Eom Ji-Sung 15, Oh Hyeon-Gyu 75)
Paraguay 0

Oct 14 – Dubai
Iran 2 (Hosseinzadeh 17 pen, Mohebi 26)
Tanzania 0

Oct 14 – Oslo
Norway 1 (Nusa 62)
New Zealand 1 (Surman 45+1)

Oct 14 – Moscow
Russia 3 (Sadulaev 18, Al. Miranchuk 43, Sergeyev 57)
Bolivia 0

Oct 14 – Tirana
Albania 4 (Abualnadi 41 og, Broja 65, Hoxha 75, Bajrami 79)
Jordan 2 (Al Rashdan 27, Olwan 90)

Oct 15 – Fort Lauderdale
Puerto Rico 0
Argentina 6 (Mac Allister 14, 36, Montiel 23, Echevarria 64 og, Latauro 79, 84)

Oct 15 – Harrison
Colombia 0
Canada 0

Oct 15 – Commerce City
United States 2 (Wright 33, 51)
Australia 1 (Bos 19)

Oct 15 – Zapopan
Mexico 1 (Berterame 3)
Ecuador 1 (Alcivar 20 pen)

2025 FIFA ARAB CUP

Qualifying Round

Nov 25-26:
Mauritania v Kuwait; Syria v South Sudan; Palestine v Libya; Oman v Somalia; Bahrain v Djibouti; Sudan v Lebanon; Comoros v Yemen

Group Stage Draw

Group A
Qatar, Tunisia, Syria/South Sudan, Palestine/Libya

Group B
Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Oman/Somalia, Comoros/Yemen

Group C
Egypt, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Mauritania/Kuwait

Group D
Algeria, Iraq, Bahrain/Djibouti, Sudan/Lebanon

Tournament takes place December 1-18

Club Football

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Matchday 3

Oct 21 – Barcelona
Barcelona (Spa) 6 (Fermin 7, 39, 76, Yamal 68 pen, Rashford 74, 79)
Olympiacos (Gre) 1 (El Kaabi 54 pen)

Oct 21 – Almaty
Kairat (Kaz) 0
Pafos (Cyp) 0

Oct 21 – London
Arsenal (Eng) 4 (Gabriel 57, Martinelli 64, Gyokeres 67, 70)
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 0

Oct 21 – Leverkusen
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 2 (Garcia 38 pen, 54)
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 7 (Pacho 7, Doue 41, 45+3, Kvaratskhelia 44, Mendes 50, Dembele 66, Vitinha 90)

Oct 21 – Copenhagen
Copenhagen (Den) 2 (Anton 33 og, Dadason 90)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 4 (Nmecha 20, 76, Bensebaini 61 pen, Silva 87)

Oct 21 – Newcastle
Newcastle United (Eng) 3 (Gordon 32, Barnes 70, 83)
Benfica (Por) 0

Oct 21 – Eindhoven
PSV (Ned) 6 (Buongiorno 35 og, Saibari 38, Man 54, 80, Pepi 87, Driouech 89)
Napoli (Ita) 2 (McTominay 31, 86)

Oct 21 – Brussels
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 0
Internazionale (Ita) 4 (Dumfries 41, Lautaro 45+1, Calhanoglu 53 pen, Esposito 76)

Oct 21 – Villarreal
Villarreal (Spa) 0
Manchester City (Eng) 2 (Haaland 17, Silva 40)

Oct 22 – Bilbao
Athletic Club (Spa) 3 (Guruzeta 40, 88, Navarro 70)
Qarabag (Aze) 1 (Andrade 1)

Oct 22 – Istanbul
Galatasaray (Tur) 3 (Osimhen 3, 33, Akgun 60)
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 1 (Helmersen 75)

Oct 22 – Monaco
Monaco (Fra) 0
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 0

Oct 22 – Bergamo
Atalanta (Ita) 0
Slavia Prague (Cze) 0

Oct 22 – London
Chelsea (Eng) 5 (Guiu 18, Sutalo 27 og, Fernandez 45 pen, Estevao 45+6 pen, George 48)
Ajax (Ned) 1 (Weghorst 33 pen)

Oct 22 – Frankfurt
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 1 (Kristensen 26)
Liverpool (Eng) 5 (Ekitike 35, Van Dijk 39, Konate 44, Gakpo 66, Szoboszlai 70)

Oct 22 – Munich
Bayern Munich (Ger) 4 (Karl 5, Kane 14, Diaz 34, Jackson 79)
Club Brugge (Bel) 0

Oct 22 – Madrid
Real Madrid (Spa) 1 (Bellingham 57)
Juventus (Ita) 0

Oct 22 – Lisbon
Sporting (Por) 2 (Catamo 69, Alisson 86)
Marseille (Fra) 1 (Paixao 14)

Matchday 4

Nov 4 – Prague
Slavia Prague (Cze) 0
Arsenal (Eng) 3 (Saka 32 pen, Merino 46, 68)

Nov 4 – Naples
Napoli (Ita) 0
Eintracht Frankfurt (Ger) 0

Nov 4 – Madrid
Atletico Madrid (Spa) 3 (Alvarez 39, Gallagher 72, Llorente 90+6)
Union Saint-Gilloise (Bel) 1 (Sykes 80)

Nov 4 – Bodo
Bodo/Glimt (Nor) 0
Monaco (Fra) 1 (Balogun 43)

Nov 4 – Turin
Juventus (Ita) 1 (Vlahovic 34)
Sporting (Por) 1 (Araujo 12)

Nov 4 – Liverpool
Liverpool (Eng) 1 (Mac Allister 61)
Real Madrid (Spa) 0

Nov 4 – Piraeus
Olympiacos (Gre) 1 (Martins 17)
PSV (Ned) 1 (Pepi 90+3)

Nov 4 – Paris
Paris Saint-Germain (Fra) 1 (Neves 74)
Bayern Munich (Ger) 2 (Diaz 4, 32)

Nov 4 – London
Tottenham Hotspur (Eng) 4 (Johnson 19, Odobert 51, Van de Ven 64, Palhinha 67)
Copenhagen (Den) 0

Nov 5 – Limassol
Pafos (Cyp) 1 (Luckassen 46)
Villarreal (Spa) 0

Nov 5 – Baku
Qarabag (Aze) 2 (Andrade 29, Jankovic 39 pen)
Chelsea (Eng) 2 (Estevao 16, Garnacho 53)

Nov 5 – Amsterdam
Ajax (Ned) 0
Galatasaray (Tur) 3 (Osimhen 59, 66 pen, 78 pen)

Nov 5 – Brugge
Club Brugge (Bel) 3 (Tresoldi 6, Forbs 17, 63)
Barcelona (Spa) 3 (Torres 8, Yamal 61, Tzolis 77 og)

Nov 5 – Milan
Internazionale (Ita) 2 (Lautaro 45, Carlos Augusto 67)
Kairat (Kaz) 1 (Arad 55)

Nov 5 – Manchester
Manchester City (Eng) 4 (Foden 22, 57, Haaland 29, Cherki 90+1)
Borussia Dortmund (Ger) 1 (Anton 72)

Nov 5 – Newcastle
Newcastle United (Eng) 2 (Burn 11, Joelinton 49)
Athletic Club (Spa) 0

Nov 5 – Marseille
Marseille (Fra) 0
Atalanta (Ita) 1 (Samardzic 89)

Nov 5 – Lisbon
Benfica (Por) 0
Bayer Leverkusen (Ger) 1 (Schick 65)

2025-26 EUROPA LEAGUE

Matchday 3

Oct 23 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 2 (Baidoo 13, Vertessen 72)
Ferencvaros (Hun) 3 (Varga 50, Zachariassen 56, Yusuf 58)

Oct 23 – Istanbul
Fenerbahce (Tur) 1 (Akturkoglu 34 pen)
Stuttgart (Ger) 0

Oct 23 – Rotterdam
Feyenoord (Ned) 3 (Read 45+3, Hadj Moussa 55, Larin 90)
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Swiderski 18)

Oct 23 – Bucharest
FCSB (Rou) 1 (Birligea 54)
Bologna (Ita) 2 (Odgaard 9, Dallinga 12)

Oct 23 – Deventer
Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) 2 (Suray 42, Deijl 61)
Aston Villa (Eng) 1 (Guessand 4)

Oct 23 – Genk
Genk (Bel) 0
Real Betis (Spa) 0

Oct 23 – Lyon
Lyon (Fra) 2 (Tolisso 3, Moreira 90)
Basel (Sui) 0

Oct 23 – Braga
Braga (Por) 2 (Navarro 22, Dorgeles 72)
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 0

Oct 23 – Bergen
Brann (Nor) 3 (Kornvig 40, Sorensen 55, Holm 79)
Rangers (Sco) 0

Oct 23 – Rome
Roma (Ita) 1 (Dybala 54 pen)
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 2 (Adu 20, Souare 22)

Oct 23 – Bern
Young Boys (Sui) 3 (Raveloson 45, Fassnacht 53, Bedia 63 pen)
Ludogorets (Bul) 2 (Stanic 26, Yordanov 90+2)

Oct 23 – Glasgow
Celtic (Sco) 2 (Scales 61, Nygren 64)
Sturm Graz (Aut) 1 (Horvat 15)

Oct 23 – Lille
Lille (Fra) 3 (Andre 57, Igamane 68, 78)
PAOK (Gre) 4 (Meite 18, Zivkovic 23, 74, Konstantelias 42)

Oct 23 – Backa Topola
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0
Midtjylland (Den) 3 (Dju 44, 84, Billing 71)

Oct 23 – Malmo
Malmo (Swe) 1 (Lewicki 45+1)
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 1 (Varela 90+6)

Oct 23 – Nottingham
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 2 (Gibbs-White 19 pen, Igor Jesus 77 pen)
Porto (Por) 0

Oct 23 – Vigo
Celta Vigo (Spa) 2 (Aspas 2, Oppong 75 og)
Nice (Fra) 1 (Cho 16)

Oct 23 – Freiburg
Freiburg (Ger) 2 (Suzuki 20, Grifo 45)
Utrecht (Ned) 0

Matchday 4

Nov 6 – Salzburg
Red Bull Salzburg (Aut) 2 (Vertessen 59, Terzic 80)
Go Ahead Eagles (Ned) 0

Nov 6 – Basel
Basel (Sui) 3 (Shaqiri 19 pen, 73, Salah 88)
FCSB (Rou) 1 (Olaru 57)

Nov 6 – Herning
Midtjylland (Den) 3 (Erlic 33, Gogorza 35, Dju 41)
Celtic (Sco) 1 (Hatate 81 pen)

Nov 6 – Utrecht
Utrecht (Ned) 1 (Rodriguez 48)
Porto (Por) 1 (Sainzu 66)

Nov 6 – Belgrade
Red Star Belgrade (Srb) 1 (Arnautovic 85 pen)
Lille (Fra) 0

Nov 6 – Zagreb
Dinamo Zagreb (Cro) 0
Celta Vigo (Spa) 3 (Duran 4, 44, Dominguez 28 og)

Nov 6 – Malmo
Malmo (Swe) 0
Panathinaikos (Gre) 1 (Djuricic 85)

Nov 6 – Nice
Nice (Fra) 1 (Kevin Carlos 25)
Freiburg (Ger) 3 (Manzambi 29, Grifo 39 pen, Scherhant 42)

Nov 6 – Graz
Sturm Graz (Aut) 0
Nottingham Forest (Eng) 0

Nov 6 – Birmingham
Aston Villa (Eng) 2 (Maatsen 45+1, Malen 49 pen)
Maccabi Tel Aviv (Isr) 0

Nov 6 – Bologna
Bologna (Ita) 0
Brann (Nor) 0

Nov 6 – Plzen
Viktoria Plzen (Cze) 0
Fenerbahce (Tur) 0

Nov 6 – Budapest
Ferencvaros (Hun) 3 (Kanichowsky 32, Cadu 53, Joseph 87)
Ludogorets (Bul) 1

Nov 6 – Thessaloniki
PAOK (Gre) 4 (Bianco 54, Giakoumakis 67, Konstantelias 72, Baba 76)
Young Boys (Sui) 0

Nov 6 – Glasgow
Rangers (Sco) 0
Roma (Ita) 2 (Soule 13, Pellegrini 36)

Nov 6 – Sevilla
Real Betis (Spa) 2 (Ezzalzouli 30, Antony 35)
Lyon (Fra) 0

Nov 6 – Braga
Braga (Por) 3 (Zalazar 30, 71, Navarro 86)
Genk (Bel) 4 (Heymans 45+2, Sor 48, Oh Hyeon-gyu 59, Medina 72)

Nov 6 – Stuttgart
Stuttgart (Ger) 1 (El Khannouss 84, Undav 90+1)
Feyenoord (Ned) 0

2025-26 CONFERENCE LEAGUE

Matchday 2

Oct 23 – Athens
AEK Athens (Gre) 6 (Koita 11, 18, Eliasson 27, Marin 55, Jovic 81, Kutesa 87)
Aberdeen (Sco) 0

Oct 23 – Gothenburg
BK Hacken (Swe) 2 (Lindberg 41, Brusberg 55)
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 2 (Garcia 15, Ratiu 90+13 pen)

Oct 23 – Reykjavik
Breidablik (Isl) 0
KuPS (Fin) 0

Oct 23 – Krakow
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 1 (Luca Meirelles 61)
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 2 (Augustyniak 16, 90+4)

Oct 23 – Pristina
Drita (Kos) 1 (Manaj 12)
Omonia (Cyp) 1 (Masouras 45+1)

Oct 23 – Rijeka
Rijeka (Cro) 1 (Adu-Adjei 75)
Sparta Prague (Cze) 0

Oct 23 – Skopje
Shkendija (Mkd) 1 (Barrett 90+1 og)
Shelbourne (Irl) 0

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Oct 23 – Strasbourg
Strasbourg (Fra) 1 (Panichelli 79)
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 1 (Stojinovic 53)

Oct 23 – Vienna
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 0
Fiorentina (Ita) 3 (Ndour 9, Dzeko 48, Gudmundsson 88)

Oct 23 – Mainz
Mainz (Ger) 1 (Weiper 24)
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 0

Oct 23 – Alkmaar
AZ (Ned) 1 (Mijnans 44)
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 0

Oct 23 – London
Crystal Palace (Eng) 0
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 1 (Bajic 51)

Oct 23 – Ta'Qali
Hamrun Spartans (Mal) 0
Lausanne-Sport (Sui) 1 (Diakite 38)

Oct 23 – Gibraltar
Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 2 (Gomez 33, Rutjens 88)
Lech Poznan (Pol) 1 (Ishak 77 pen)

Oct 23 – Samsun
Samsunspor (Tur) 3 (Musaba 2, Mouandilmadji 34, Holse 62)
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 0

Oct 23 – Dublin
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 0
Celje (Svn) 2 (Kovacevic 33, 40)

Oct 23 – Olomouc
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 1 (Kral 83)
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 1 (Svarnas 90)

Oct 23 – Craiova
Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 1 (Etim 38)
Noah (Arm) 1 (Mulahusejnovic 73)

Matchday 3

Nov 6 – Mainz
Mainz (Ger) 2 (Hollerbach 68, Lee Jae-sung 90+5)
Fiorentina (Ita) 0

Nov 6 – Prague
Sparta Prague (Cze) 0
Rakow Czestochowa (Pol) 0

Nov 6 – Athens
AEK Athens (Gre) 1 (Jovic 90 pen)
Shamrock Rovers (Irl) 1 (Burke 21 pen)

Nov 6 – Larnaca
AEK Larnaca (Cyp) 0
Aberdeen (Sco) 0

Nov 6 – Krakow
Shakhtar Donetsk (Ukr) 2 (Bondarenko 28, Kaua Elias 65)
Breidablik (Isl) 0

Nov 6 – Yerevan
Noah (Arm) 1 (Mulahusejnovic 21)
Sigma Olomouc (Cze) 2 (Slavicek 10, Sylla 24)

Nov 6 – Tampere
KuPS (Fin) 3 (Antwi 41, Parzyszek 48, Oksanen 81)
Slovan Bratislava (Svk) 1 (Marcelli 3)

Nov 6 – Celje
Celje (Svn) 2 (Iosifov 72, Karnicnik 77)
Legia Warsaw (Pol) 1 (Urbanski 17)

Nov 6 – Samsun
Samsunspor (Tur) 3 (Holse 18, Kilinc 58, Mouandilmadji 77)
Hamrun Spartans (Mal) 0

Nov 6 – Hacken
BK Hacken (Swe) 1 (Dembe 61)
Strasbourg (Fra) 2 (Enciso 21, Godo 60)

Nov 6 – London
Crystal Palace (Eng) 3 (Lacroix 22, Sarr 45+4, 57)
AZ (Ned) 1 (Mijnans 54)

Nov 6 – Lausanne
Lausanne-Sport (Sui) 1 (Bair 40)
Omonia (Cyp) 1 (Neophytou 34)

Nov 6 – Lublin
Dynamo Kyiv (Ukr) 6 (Popov 21, Guerrero 56, Kabaiev 59, Buyalskiy 67, Yarmolenko 78, Blanuta 83)
Zrinjski Mostar (Bih) 0

Nov 6 – Skopje
Shkendija (Mkd) 1 (Latifi 49)
Jagiellonia Bialystok (Pol) 1 (Lozano 90+10)

Nov 6 – Gibraltar
Lincoln Red Imps (Gib) 1 (Gomez 83)
Rijeka (Cro) 1 (Fruk 41)

Nov 6 – Madrid
Rayo Vallecano (Spa) 3 (Palazon 58, De Frutos 83, Garcia 90+4)
Lech Poznan (Pol) 2 (Palma 11, Kozubal 39)

Nov 6 – Dublin
Shelbourne (Irl) 0
Drita (Kos) 1 (Ajzeraj 57)

Nov 6 – Vienna
Rapid Vienna (Aut) 0
Universitatea Craiova (Rou) 1 (Romanchuk 37)

SOUTH AMERICA

2025 COPA LIBERTADORES

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Oct 22 – Rio de Janeiro
Flamengo (Bra) 1 (Carrascal 88)
Racing (Arg) 0

Oct 23 – Quito
LDU Quito (Ecu) 3 (Villamil 16, 45+2, Alzugaray 27 pen)
Palmeiras (Bra) 0

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Oct 29 – Avellaneda
Racing (Arg) 0
Flamengo (Bra) 0
Flamengo win 1-0 on aggregate

Oct 30 – Sao Paulo
Palmeiras (Bra) 4 (Sosa 20, Fuchs 45+5, Veiga 68, 82 pen)
LDU Quito (Ecu) 0
Palmeiras win 4-3 on aggregate

2025 COPA SUDAMERICANA

Semi-Finals – 1st Leg

Oct 21 – Quito
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Sornoza 11 pen)
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 1 (Dudu 90+1)

Oct 23 – Santiago
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 2 (Di Yorio 63, Aranguiz 90+9 pen)
Lanus (Arg) 2 (Castillo 25, 29)

Semi-Finals – 2nd Leg

Oct 28 – Belo Horizonte
Atletico Mineiro (Bra) 3 (Arana 36, Bernard 43, Hulk 73)
Independiente del Valle (Ecu) 1 (Spinelli 63)
Atletico Mineiro win 4-2 on aggregate

Oct 30 – Lanus
Lanus (Arg) 1 (Castillo 62)
Universidad de Chile (Chi) 0
Lanus win 3-2 on aggregate

CONCACAF

2025 CONCACAF CARIBBEAN CUP

Semi-Finals

Oct 22-23:
Defence Force (Tri) 1-5 Mount Pleasant (Jam); O&M (Dom) 1-1 Cibao (Dom)
Nov 5-6:
Mount Pleasant (Jam) 0-1 Defence Force (Tri) (agg 5–2);
Cibao (Dom) 0-1 O&M (Dom) (agg 1-2)

2025 CONCACAF CENTRAL AMERICAN CUP

Play-Ins

Oct 21-22:
Cartagines (Crc) 1-0 Motagua (Hon); Sporting San Miguelito (Pan) 1-0 Plaza Amador (Pan)
Oct 28-29:
Motagua (Hon) 1-3 Cartagines (Crc) (agg 1-4); Plaza Amador (Pan) 2-3 Sporting San Miguelito (Pan) (agg 2-4)

Cartagines and Sporting San Miguelito qualify for first round of the 2026 CONCACAF Champions Cup

Semi-Finals

Oct 22-23:
Real Espana (Hon) 1-1 Xelaju (Gua); Alajuelense (Crc) 1-1 Olimpia (Hon)
Oct 29-30:
Xelaju (Gua) 1-1 Real Espana (Hon) (agg 2-2; *Xelaju win 2-1 on pens*);
Olimpia (Hon) 1-1 Alajuelense (Crc) (agg 2-2; *Alajuelense win 3-0 on pens*)

DOMINICA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dublanc (C)	18	15	3	0	76	15	48
Mahaut Soca Strikers	18	11	4	3	46	26	37
Portsmouth Bombers	18	10	4	4	49	24	34
WE United	18	10	1	7	48	32	31
Sagicor South East	18	8	4	6	48	38	28
Harlem United	18	8	3	7	47	40	27
Middleham United	18	6	4	8	46	56	22
Point Michel	18	4	2	12	37	73	14
East Central	18	2	4	12	26	46	10
DS FC (R)	18	1	1	16	16	89	4

GUYANA

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Slingerz (C)	18	16	2	0	105	5	50
Guyana Police Force	18	12	4	2	84	18	40
Guyana Defence Force	18	12	3	3	110	15	39
Western Tigers	18	10	4	4	49	19	34
Santos	18	8	2	8	36	30	26
Moneddderlust	18	7	3	8	34	49	24
Ann's Grove United	18	4	4	10	26	67	16
Den Amstel	18	4	3	11	36	44	15
Fruta Conquerors	18	3	3	12	16	54	12
Mainstay Gold Stars (R)	18	0	0	18	10	205	-3

UNITED STATES

MLS Eastern Conference

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Philadelphia Union* (S)	34	20	8	6	57	35	66
FC Cincinnati*	34	20	9	5	52	40	65
Inter Miami*	34	19	7	8	81	55	65
Charlotte FC*	34	19	13	2	55	46	59
New York City FC*	34	17	12	5	50	44	56
Nashville SC*	34	16	12	6	58	45	54
Columbus Crew*	34	14	8	12	55	51	54
Chicago Fire**	34	15	11	8	68	60	53
Orlando City**	34	14	9	11	63	51	53
New York Red Bulls	34	12	15	7	48	47	43
New England Revolution	34	9	16	9	44	51	36
Toronto FC	34	6	14	14	37	44	32
CF Montreal	34	6	18	10	34	60	28
Atlanta United	34	5	16	13	38	63	28
D.C. United	34	5	18	11	30	66	26

*Qualify for MLS Cup
**Enter wild card round

MLS Western Conference

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
San Diego FC*	34	19	9	6	64	41	63
Vancouver Whitecaps*	34	18	7	9	66	38	63
Los Angeles FC*	34	17	8	9	65	40	60
Minnesota United*	34	16	8	10	56	39	58
Seattle Sounders*	34	15	9	10	58	48	55
Austin FC*	34	13	13	8	37	45	47
FC Dallas*	34	11	12	11	52	55	44
Portland Timbers**	34	11	12	11	41	48	44
Real Salt Lake**	34	12	17	5	38	49	41
San Jose Earthquakes	34	11	15	8	60	63	41
Colorado Rapids	34	11	15	8	44	56	41
Houston Dynamo	34	9	15	10	43	56	37
St Louis City	34	8	18	8	44	58	32
LA Galaxy	34	7	18	9	46	66	30
Sporting Kansas City	34	7	20	7	46	70	28

*Qualify for MLS Cup
**Enter wild card round

ASIA

2025-26 AFC CHAMPIONS LEAGUE ELITE

West Region

Matchday 3

Oct 20 – Abu Dhabi
Al Wahda (UAE) 3 (Khribin 35 pen, Diarra 45+2, Zouhir 67)
Al Duhail (Qat) 1 (Piatek 20)

Oct 20 – Sharjah
Sharjah (UAE) 0
Tractor (Irn) 5 (Lushkja 8, 11, Hashemnejad 40, Esmaeilifar 45+3, Kazemayn 84)

Oct 20 – Baghdad
Al Shorta (Irq) 1 (Shakir 5)
Al Ittihad (KSA) 4 (Diaby 17, Fabinho 29, Aouar 60, 76)

Oct 20 –Jeddah
Al Ahli (KSA) 4 (Millot 32, Kessie 38, 41, Abu Al Shamat 76)
Al Gharafa (Qat) 0

Oct 21 – Dubai
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 4 (Cartabia 8, Renan 27, Lima 41, Breno Cascardo 90+5)
Nasaf (Uzb) 1 (Abdirakhmatov 10)

Oct 21 – Riyadh
Al Hilal (KSA) 3 (Akcicek 25, Koulibaly 40, Milinkovic-Savic 84)
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Firmino 67)

Matchday 4

Nov 3 – Qarshi
Nasaf (Uzb) 1 (Bakhromov 42)
Al Wahda (UAE) 2 (Ogbu 52, Canedo 89)

Nov 3 – Tabriz
Tractor (Irn) 1 (Torabi 26)
Al Shorta (Irq) 0

Nov 3 – Doha
Al Duhail (Qat) 3 (Edmilson Junior 2, Bourigeaud 39, Boulbina 57)
Shabab Al Ahli (UAE) 1 (Breno 42)

Nov 3 – Al Rayyan
Al Gharafa (Qat) 1 (Al Alwi 90+8)
Al Hilal (KSA) 2 (S. Al Dawsari 9, Kaio Cesar 66)

Nov 4 – Doha
Al Sadd (Qat) 1 (Claudinho 63)
Al Ahli (KSA) 2 (Mahrez 34, Goncalves 68)

Nov 4 –Jeddah
Al Ittihad (KSA) 3 (Bergwijn 8, Benzema 66, Fernandes 90+4)
Sharjah (UAE) 0

East Region

Matchday 3

Oct 21 – Melbourne
Melbourne City (Aus) 2 (Rashani 84, Caputo 90+7)
Buriram United (Tha) 1 (Causic 72)

Oct 21 – Ulsan
Ulsan HD (Kor) 1 (Kim Min-hyeok 12)
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 0

Oct 21 – Chengdu
Chengdu Rongcheng (Chn) 0
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 2 (Arribas 5, Mendez 62)

Oct 21 – Shanghai
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 2 (Fu Huan 12 og, Soma 25)

Oct 22 – Chuncheon
Gangwon FC (Kor) 4 (Lee Sang-heon 7, Mo Jae-hyeon 21, Song Jun-seok 43, Kim Gun-hee 90+5)
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 3 (Miyashiro 48, 89, Patric 50)

Oct 22 – Shanghai
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 2 (Asue 57, Luis 89)
FC Seoul (Kor) 0

Matchday 4

Nov 4 – Hiroshima
Sanfrecce Hiroshima (Jpn) 1 (Kato 63)
Gangwon FC (Kor) 0

Nov 4 – Machida
Machida Zelvia (Jpn) 1 (Mochizuki 24)
Melbourne City (Aus) 2 (Shoji 1 og, Nabbout 90+4)

Nov 4 – Seoul
FC Seoul (Kor) 0
Chengdu Rongcheng (Chn) 0

Nov 4 – Buriram
Buriram United (Tha) 2 (Chaided 15, Good 65)
Shanghai Port (Chn) 0

Nov 5 – Kobe
Vissel Kobe (Jpn) 1 (Patric 58)
Ulsan HD (Kor) 0

Nov 5 – Iskandar Puteri
Johor Darul Ta'zim (Mas) 3 (Silva 48, 88, Arribas 63)
Shanghai Shenhua (Chn) 1 (Mineiro 71 pen)

2025-26 CHAMPIONS LEAGUE TWO

West Region

Group A
Oct 22: Esteghlal (Irn) 2-0 Al Wehdat (Jor); Al Muharraq (Bhr) 0-1 Al Wasl (UAE)
Oct 29: Al Wehdat (Jor) 2-1 Al Muharraq (Bhr)
Nov 5: Al Wasl (UAE) 2-2 Al Muharraq (Bhr); Al Wehdat (Jor) 1-1 Esteghlal (Irn)

Group B
Oct 22: Andijon (Uzb) 0-0 Al Khaldiya (Bhr); Al Ahli (Qat) 2-2 Arkadag (Tkm)
Oct 29: Al Khaldiya (Bhr) 1-2 Al Ahli (Qat)
Nov 5: Arkadag (Tkm) 1-1 Al Ahli (Qat); Al Khaldiya (Bhr) 0-0 Andijon (Uzb)

Group C
Oct 21: Ahal (Tkm) 0-1 Sepahan (Irn)
Nov 4: Sepahan (Irn) 2-2 Ahal (Tkm)

Group D
Oct 22: Istiklol (Tjk) 2-1 Al Zawraa (Irq); Goa (Ind) 1-2 Al Nassr (KSA)
Nov 5: Al Zawraa (Irq) 2-1 Istiklol (Tjk); Al Nassr (KSA) 4-0 Goa (Ind)

East Region

Group E
Oct 23: Tai Po (Hkg) 3-3 Beijing Guoan (Chn); Cong An Ha Noi (Vie) 1-1 Macarthur (Aus)
Nov 6: Macarthur (Aus) 2-1 Cong An Ha Noi (Vie); Beijing Guoan (Chn) 3-0 Tai Po (Hkg)

Group F
Oct 22: Gamba Osaka (Jpn) 3-1 Nam Dinh (Vie); Ratchaburi (Tha) 5-1 Eastern (Hkg)
Nov 5: Eastern (Hkg) 0-7 Ratchaburi (Tha); Nam Dinh (Vie) 0-1 Gamba Osaka (Jpn)

Group G
Oct 23: Bangkok United (Tha) 1-0 Lion City Sailors (Sgp); Persib (Idn) 2-0 Selangor (Mas)
Nov 6: Lion City Sailors (Sgp) 1-2 Bangkok United (Tha); Selangor (Mas) 2-3 Persib (Idn)

Group H
Oct 23:
Tampines Rovers (Sgp) 1-0 Pohang Steelers (Kor); Kaya–Iloilo (Phi) 0-2 BG Pathum United (Tha)
Nov 6:
Pohang Steelers (Kor) 1-1 Tampines Rovers (Sgp); BG Pathum United (Tha) 2-1 Kaya–Iloilo (Phi)

2025-26 AFC CHALLENGE LEAGUE

West Region

Group A
Oct 25: Altyn Asyr (Tkm) 1-0 Abdysh-Ata (Kgz); Al Shabab (Oma) 1-0 Paro (Bhu)
Oct 28: Paro (Bhu) 1-3 Altyn Asyr (Tkm); Abdysh-Ata (Kgz) 1-2 Al Shabab (Oma)
Oct 31: Altyn Asyr (Tkm) 1-3 Al Shabab (Oma); Paro (Bhu) 3-3 Abdysh-Ata (Kgz)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Shabab (Q)	3	3	0	0	6	2	9
Altyn Asyr	3	2	0	1	5	4	6
Abdysh-Ata	3	0	1	2	4	6	1
Paro	3	0	1	2	4	7	1

Group B
Oct 25: Al Seeb (Oma) 3-2 Bashundhara (Ban); Al Ansar (Lbn) 2-3 Al Kuwait (Kuw)
Oct 28: Bashundhara (Ban) 0-3 Al Ansar (Lbn); Al Kuwait (Kuw) 1-1 Al Seeb (Oma)
Oct 31: Al Seeb (Oma) 1-2 Al Ansar (Lbn); Al Kuwait (Kuw) 2-0 Bashundhara (Ban)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Al Kuwait (Q)	3	2	1	0	6	3	7
Al Ansar (Q)	3	2	0	1	7	4	6
Al Seeb	3	1	1	1	5	5	4
Bashundhara	3	0	0	3	2	8	0

Group C
Oct 25: Safa (Lbn) 2-2 Al Arabi (Kuw); Regar-TadAZ (Tjk) 0-0 Muras United (Kgz)
Oct 28: Al Arabi (Kuw) 2-1 Regar-TadAZ (Tjk); Muras United (Kgz) 2-0 Safa (Lbn)
Oct 31: Regar-TadAZ (Tjk) 1-2 Safa (Lbn); Al Arabi (Kuw) 1-1 Muras United (Kgz)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Muras Utd (Q)	3	1	2	0	3	1	5
Al Arabi	3	1	2	0	5	4	5
Safa	3	1	1	1	4	5	4
Regar-TadAZ	3	0	1	2	2	4	1

East Region

Group D
Oct 26: Manila Digger (Phi) 3-1 Ezra (Lao); PKR Svay Rieng (Cam) 3-0 SP Falcons (Mng)
Oct 29: Ezra (Lao) 0-3 PKR Svay Rieng (Cam); SP Falcons (Mng) 0-2 Manila Digger (Phi)
Nov 1: SP Falcons (Mng) 3-1 Ezra (Lao); Manila Digger (Phi) 2-2 PKR Svay Rieng (Cam)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
PKR Svay Rieng (Q)	3	2	1	0	8	2	7
Manila Digger (Q)	3	2	1	0	7	3	7
SP Falcons	3	1	0	2	3	6	3
Ezra	3	0	0	3	2	9	0

Group E
Oct 26: Shan United (Mya) 1-2 Tainan City (Tpe); Dewa United (Idn) 1-1 Phnom Penh Crown (Cam)
Oct 29:
Phnom Penh Crown (Cam) 3-1 Shan United (Mya); Tainan City (Tpe) 0-4 Dewa United (Idn)
Nov 1:
Tainan City (Tpe) 2-3 Phnom Penh Crown (Cam); Dewa United (Idn) 4-1 Shan United (Mya)

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Dewa Utd (Q)	3	2	1	0	9	2	7
PP Crown (Q)	3	2	1	0	7	4	7
Tainan City	3	1	0	2	4	8	3
Shan United	3	0	0	3	3	9	0

BHUTAN

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
Paro (C)	18	16	1	1	74	17	49
Thimphu City	18	14	1	3	64	23	43
RTC	18	12	2	4	62	19	38
Transport United	18	11	1	6	46	27	34
BFF Academy U19	18	8	3	7	40	36	27
Ugyen Academy	18	8	1	9	38	41	25
Tsirang	18	4	4	10	21	42	16
Tensung	18	3	2	13	17	48	11
Southern City	18	3	1	14	15	59	10
Samtse	18	2	2	14	22	87	8

GUAM

	P	W	D	L	F	A	Pts
NAPA Rovers FC* (C)	14	13	1	0	131	20	40
Wings FC*	14	11	1	2	111	17	34
Sidekick SC*	14	8	0	6	44	46	24
BOG Strykers*	14	7	2	5	65	38	23
Quality Distributors	14	6	2	6	50	50	20
Guam Shipyard	14	5	0	9	49	84	15
Southern Cobras	14	3	0	11	23	98	9
Southern Heat Omega	14	0	0	14	11	122	0
U16 National Academy	8	4	1	3	18	27	13

*Enter finals stage

Semi-Finals
Oct 5:
NAPA Rovers FC 10-1 Bank of Guam Strykers; Wings FC 3-0 Sidekick SC

Third Place Play-Off
Oct 12: Bank of Guam Strykers 3-3 Sidekick SC *(Bank of Guam Strykers win 4-1 on pens)*

Final
Oct 12: Wings FC 4-5 NAPA Rovers FC

AFRICA

2025-26 CAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE

Second Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Oct 17-19: Kenya Police (Ken) 0-1 Al Hilal Omdurman (Sdn); US Monastir (Tun) 0-3 JS Kabylie (Alg); Aigle Noir (Bdi) 0-1 Al Ahly (Egy); Rahimo (Bfa) 0-1 Esperance (Tun); Silver Strikers (Mwi) 1-0 Young Africans (Tan); Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) 0-2 Petro Atletico (Ang); Black Bulls (Moz) 1-0 Rivers United (Nga); FC Nouadhibou (Mtn) 1-1 Stade Malien (Mli); Horoya (Gui) 1-1 AS FAR (Mar); Colombe Sportive (Cmr) 1-1 MC Alger (Alg); Remo Stars (Nga) 1-5 Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA); Nsingizini Hotspurs (Swz) 0-3 Simba (Tan); Vipers (Uga) 1-2 Power Dynamos (Zam); Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) 3-0 Orlando Pirates (RSA)
Oct 26: Ethiopian Insurance (Eth) 1-1 Pyramids (Egy); Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) 1-1 RS Berkane (Mar)

Second Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Oct 24-26: Al Hilal Omdurman (Sdn) 3-1 Kenya Police (Ken) (agg 4-1); Power Dynamos (Zam) 1-1 Vipers (Uga) (agg 3-2); Al Ahly (Egy) 1-0 Aigle Noir (Bdi) (agg 2-0); JS Kabylie (Alg) 2-1 US Monastir (Tun) (agg 5-1); AS FAR (Mar) 3-0 Horoya (Gui) (agg 4-1); Young Africans (Tan) 2-0 Silver Strikers (Mwi) (agg 2-1); Petro Atletico (Ang) 2-0 Stade d'Abidjan (Civ) (agg 4-0); Rivers United (Nga) 3-1 Black Bulls (Moz) (agg 3-2); Orlando Pirates (RSA) 3-0 Saint-Eloi Lupopo (Cod) (agg 3-3, *Saint-Eloi Lupopo win 5-4 on pens*); Esperance (Tun) 3-0 Rahimo (Bfa) (agg 4-0); Stade Malien (Mli) 2-0 FC Nouadhibou (Mtn) (agg 3-1); MC Alger (Alg) 0-0 Colombe Sportive (Cmr) (agg 1-1, *MC Alger win on away goals*); Mamelodi Sundowns (RSA) 2-0 Remo Stars (Nga) (agg 7-1); Simba (Tan) 0-0 Nsingizini Hotspurs (Swz) (agg 3-0)
Oct 30-Nov 1: Pyramids (Egy) 2-0 Ethiopian Insurance (Eth) (agg 3-1); RS Berkane (Mar) 2-1 Al Ahli Tripoli (Lby) (agg 3-2)

2025-26 CAF CONFEDERATION CUP

Second Qualifying Round – 1st Leg

Oct 17-19: Asante Kotoko (Gha) 0-1 Wydad (Mar); AFAD Djekanou (Civ) 1-0 USM Alger (Alg); Hafia (Gui) 1-1 CR Belouizdad (Alg); USFA (Bfa) 0-0 Djoliba (Mli); Olympic Safi (Mar) 2-0 Stade Tunisien (Tun); San Pedro (Civ) 1-1 Coton FC (Ben); Dekedaha (Som) 0-6 Zamalek (Egy); Al Ittihad Tripoli (Lby) 0-0 Al Masry (Egy); Nairobi United (Ken) 2-0 Etoile du Sahel (Tun); KMKM (Zan) 0-2 Azam (Tan); Flambeau du Centre (Bdi) 1-1 Singida Black Stars (Tan); 15 de Agosto (Eqg) 0-0 Stellenbosch (RSA); ZESCO United (Zam) 4-3 Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot); AS Simba (Cod) 0-0 Kaizer Chiefs (RSA); Maniema Union (Cod) 1-1 Royal Leopards (Swz); Ferroviario de Maputo (Moz) 0-1 AS Otoho (Cgo)

Second Qualifying Round – 2nd Leg

Oct 24-26: Wydad (Mar) 5-1 Asante Kotoko (Gha) (agg 6-1); CR Belouizdad (Alg) 2-0 Hafia (Gui) (agg 3-1); Zamalek (Egy) 1-0 Dekedaha (Som) (agg 7-0); Azam (Tan) 7-0 KMKM (Zan) (agg 9-0); USM Alger (Alg) 3-0 AFAD Djekanou (Civ) (agg 3-1); Stade Tunisien (Tun) 2-1 Olympic Safi (Mar) (agg 2-3); Coton FC (Ben) 0-3 San Pedro (Civ) (agg 1-4); Singida Black Stars (Tan) 3-1 Flambeau du Centre (Bdi) (agg 4-2); Jwaneng Galaxy (Bot) 1-1 ZESCO United (Zam) (agg 4-5); Royal Leopards (Swz) 1-1 Maniema Union (Cod) (agg 2-2, *Maniema Union win 4-3 on pens*); Djoliba (Mli) 2-1 USFA (Bfa) (agg 2-1); Al Masry (Egy) 2-1 Al Ittihad Tripoli (Lby) (agg 2-1); Etoile du Sahel (Tun) 2-0 Nairobi United (Ken) (agg 2-2, *Nairobi United win 7-6 on pens*); Stellenbosch (RSA) 4-1 15 de Agosto (Eqg) (agg 4-1); Kaizer Chiefs (RSA) 3-1 AS Simba (Cod) (agg 3-1); AS Otoho (Cgo) 2-0 Ferroviario de Maputo (Moz) (agg 3-0)

2025 CAF SUPER CUP

Oct 18 – Cairo
Pyramids (Egy) 1 (Mayele 75)
RS Berkane (Mar) 0

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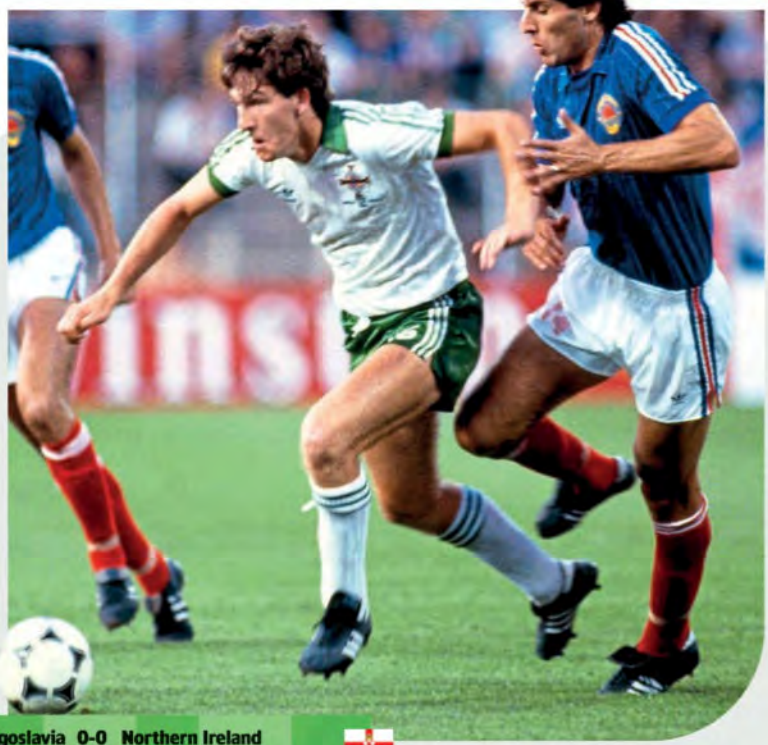
Norman Whiteside

Yugoslavia v Northern Ireland

1982 World Cup, Zaragoza, Spain

When Norman Whiteside made his Northern Ireland debut at the 1982 World Cup aged 17 years and 41 days, he became the youngest player in the history of the finals, breaking the record set by Pele 24 years earlier – an achievement that still stands today



Record-breaker... a teenage Whiteside holds off a Yugoslavian challenge at *Espana '82*

"The thing about that World Cup was I'd only played about 100 minutes in the First Division before I was chosen to go to Spain. I did watch Northern Ireland qualify for the tournament at Windsor Park but being 16, turning 17 shortly, I didn't think at any stage that I'd be part of that squad.

I had a little whisper from our physiotherapist at Manchester United, Jim McGregor, who was also the physio for Northern Ireland. He was saying little things like: "[Northern Ireland manager] Billy Bingham's been watching you in the reserves." So I had little hints, but I didn't think I was going to walk into the team.

We were in pre-World Cup training down in Brighton. At that time Billy didn't plan to start me, but then I did quite well in the first week. After that, he told me I'd definitely be in the first team. He had all the confidence in me. That was absolutely amazing.

Despite being several years younger than the rest of the squad, I fitted in quite well. I took things in my stride, and physically I was the same size as most of the boys. But they were very, very good to me. They didn't treat me as a kid, they treated me as one of them and that's the way I wanted it to be.

I didn't realise that I was going to beat Pele's record until the hotel filled up with the world's media once the team was announced. The funny thing is, after I broke his record, Pele sent a message to say: "Norman, congratulations for beating my record. I hope you go on and have the same success as me and win three World Cups!"

We were pretty much thrown in against Yugoslavia. The one person that was noted to me was Nikola Jovanovic, who was at Old Trafford at the time. He was in the Yugoslavia team, but I didn't really know him in Manchester because I was still a kid in the reserves. That's the only person that I would recognise. Otherwise it was fend for yourself basically.

In international football at that time, the difference was the quality of players you're playing with and against. People mostly stepped back to the halfway line and then you had to try to beat them from there. There wasn't so much pressing. It was more when you got the ball that you had to demonstrate the talent to do something with it. It wasn't the hustle and bustle of English league football going up and tackling near the corner flag to try to win the ball back. It was: "Get back to the halfway line, get your unit together, get your structure together and we'll take it from there."

I don't think many families came out for any of the players. We'd been told that the airfares had been paid for Northern Ireland to go home at the end of the group stage. After we beat Spain, they had to change all the tickets because we got through to the next phase. It was a brilliant tournament for us.

I didn't believe I would still hold the record after 43 years. I always have a look at the squads when the World Cup comes around and I'll be doing the same next year. It's all a bit of luck. First, you've got to get chosen and then your birthday has to fall on the right date, in the right year. Next year, if no one beats my record, it will be the 12th World Cup of being the youngest player and Pele had six."

> "The airfares had been paid for Northern Ireland to go home at the end of the group stage. After we beat Spain, they had to change all the tickets"

Interview by Asif Burhan

Up for auction... Whiteside's iconic Northern Ireland shirt
Credit: Budds Auctions

Norman Whiteside's historic match-worn shirt from his record-breaking appearance versus Yugoslavia will be part of a collection of memorabilia auctioned by Budds in the lead up to the 2026 FIFA World Cup

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